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## Moving forward, waiting or standing still? Service users' experiences from a Norwegian labour activation programme

## På vei framover, ventende eller i stillstand? Brukeres erfaringer med arbeidsaktivering

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### ABSTRACT

Labour activation policy relies on a notion of temporal homogeneity, with the assumption that the service user, once enrolled in a labour activation programme, moves forward on a linear and progressive trajectory into the labour market. However, for many, labour activation is experienced as a discontinuous and interrupted trajectory, through which one occasionally moves forward, but which also contains periods of immobility and standstill. The literature has illuminated the complex nature of labour activation trajectories, including transitions over time. We introduce a focus on *how* service users in a Norwegian labour activation programme construct understandings of time itself, as 'waiting' or 'moving forward', in connection with their labour activation experiences. Applying a rhythm analysis that attends to biography and change over time, we explore how service users' life course rhythms meet with and diverge from the institutionally defined labour activation rhythms, and how dissonance may shape the way that users understand their labour activation experiences. The study is based on fieldwork in The Norwegian labour and welfare services (NAV). Our findings point to how participants experience the time spent in labour activation differently and how seemingly similar experiences and activities may mean 'waiting' for some and 'moving forward' for others.

### ABSTRAKT

Aktiveringspolicy er basert på en homogen forståelse av aktivering som legger til grunn en antakelse om at brukere som deltar i aktiveringstiltak beveger seg fremover i et lineært, stegvis og progressivt forløp henimot arbeidsmarkedet. For mange av brukerne erfares aktiveringen imidlertid som et stykkevis og delt forløp, hvor man noen ganger beveger seg framover og i perioder står stille, eller man beveger seg horisontalt bortover inne i systemet. Forskning har vist at aktiveringsforløp kan være komplekse og sammensatte, inklusiv i perioder og over tid bestå av venting. Vårt fokus er på hvordan brukere i et norsk aktiveringsprogram på ulike måter konstruerer forståelser av tid i forbindelse med aktivering. Ved hjelp av rytmeanalyse utforsker vi hvordan brukers livsrytmer sammenfaller med og atskiller seg fra de foreskrevne institusjonerte rytmene som definerer aktivering, samt

### KEYWORDS

Labour activation; service users' experiences; rhythm analysis; time and trajectories

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arbeidsaktivering; brukererfaringer; rytmeanalyse; tid og forløp; meningsskapning

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hvordan dissonansen mellom disse rytmene former måten brukerne forstår sine erfaringer i aktivering. Studien er basert på feltarbeid i lokale NAV kontor, i norsk arbeids- og velferdstjeneste. Funnene peker på hvordan brukere opplever tid i aktiveringsforløpet ulikt, og hvordan tilsynelatende like erfaringer og aktiviteter kan bety «venting» for noen og «bevegelse framover» for andre.

No camera, no image or series of images can show these rhythms. It requires equally attentive eyes and ears, a head and a memory and a heart ... in order to grasp this present ... in the movement of diverse rhythms ... in order not to isolate this present and in order to *live* it in all its diversity. (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 36)

## Introduction

A turn towards activation has for several decades dominated European social policy and social work institutions. In Norway, this tendency has been manifested through its official work approach – ‘arbeidslinjen’ (Lødemel, 1997) – since the beginning of the 1990s. The primary focus and intention of the Norwegian work approach have been to move the unemployed into paid employment, with the goal of financial self-sufficiency (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014). However, employment has also been considered an important arena for social inclusion, societal recognition, individual self-realisation and wellbeing more broadly speaking (Halvorsen, 2012). Therefore, labour activation programmes and measures are also considered important means for the integration and social inclusion of immigrants and refugees alike (Hardoy & Zhang, 2019; Nordic Council, 2019). Hence, labour activation has increasingly targeted the ‘hard to employ’ – i.e. people who are considered to be located far from the labour market due to lack of education, poor vocational or Norwegian language skills, lack of work-life experience, or social and health-related challenges. Nevertheless and regardless of individual barriers to employment, labour activation policy relies on the assumption that individuals, once enrolled in a labour activation programme, will move forward on a linear, stepwise and progressive trajectory into or closer to the labour market (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019).

Newer research challenges this notion of temporal homogeneity, and explores the complexity of labour activation trajectories, challenging the notion of linear movement forward (Urry, 2007). The study of complexity and service users’ understandings about their labour activation trajectories are considered worthwhile because ‘what works is what makes sense to the individual client in a specific situation’ (Danneris, 2018, p. 370). Researchers exploring the complexity of movement along a trajectory have suggested that such trajectories are comprised of varying patterns consisting of distinct stages through time (Danneris, 2018). Service users may, for instance, experience the labour activation trajectory as discontinuous and interrupted, where one occasionally moves forward, but where one also experiences periods of immobility and standstill, or horizontal movement inside the system (Danneris, 2018; Gjersøe & Leseth, 2021).

Researchers operating from a social constructionist perspective have suggested that the labour activation trajectory is a co-construction – real in the sense that it is defined by dominant institutional norms, discourses and expectations, but varying subjectively for service users according to different working relationships (Hansen & Natland, 2017) and due to divergence from institutionally imagined pathways (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019). The dissonance between personal and institutionally imagined labour activation trajectories has been attributed to gendered identity formation and perceptions of self as employable, and expectations related to one’s level of competency (Hansen, 2018). Personal activation trajectories may also face institutional barriers such as a lack of relevant measures, and contradicting rules and regulations (Hansen, 2020).

Researchers exploring trajectories have mostly attended to mapping patterned ‘senses of time’, as they are comprised in personal and often complex but nonetheless shared and common ways (see Castles & Miller, 1993; Cwerner, 2001; Danneris, 2018; Gjersøe & Leseth, 2021; Piore, 1979; Roberts, 1995). This has included a focus on the composition or assemblage of individual and personal life course transitions and has recognised that such trajectories are non-linear as opposed to standardised seemingly ‘objective’ stages of a common life-cycle (Worth & Hardill, 2015). For instance, scholars exploring the experience of ‘waiting’ with reference to trajectories have focused on the interruptions and changes that mark the process of waiting in the system (Rotter, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2020). Such studies have introduced various typologies of waiting (Dwyer, 2009; Hage, 2009; Rotter, 2016) that may be experienced by service users with reference to their labour activation trajectories. Thus, the focus has primarily been on exploring the *whats* of time – on illuminating the ‘patterned progression of individual experience through time’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, p. 1).

We shift the focus from the patterned composition of trajectories to an exploration of the *hows* of time. More specifically, we explore *how* service users variably and situationally understand what objectively appears to be ‘waiting’ in their personal labour activation trajectories, both with reference to the life course and to ongoing and changing social contexts. Our focus is on service users’ engagement in personal sense-making of time with reference to their labour activation trajectories (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), as this sense-making is embedded in their everyday lives over time and place (Adam, 1990). Thus, rather than focusing on the patterned composition of personal labour activation trajectories and typologies of waiting with reference primarily to the situation *now*, we analyse from the perspective that service users’ subjective understandings of such trajectories and their temporal features are actively co-constructed (with service providers, with family, friends in Norway and abroad, with one’s sense of changing identity and status, with the state, etc.) and are, thus, constituted within certain contexts and according to certain biographies. In other words, everyday processes in social contexts constitute understandings of time, rather than being determined by time (Adam, 1990). For individuals on the edge or outside of the labour market who are struggling to obtain paid employment, time, as constituted by everyday life, may be understood according to periods of uncertainty; plans, goals and projects may be constantly re-worked or extemporised as new facts on the ground require adjustment and improvisation, a process that is both retrospective and prospective (Amit & Knowles, 2017; Cwerner, 2001).

We explore how service users – participants in the Norwegian qualification programme (QP), a national activation programme for recipients of social assistance allowance – make meaning of their time and activities in the programme while preparing for and attempting to obtain paid employment. More specifically, we explore how they negotiate their sense-making about time and activity with reference to institutionally imagined trajectories and temporalities of mobility and forward movement, their own sense of lived time, and their changing institutional and biographical circumstances (Gubrium & Leirvik, 2021; Hansen & Gubrium, 2021). We may think of this sense of interaction between activity, time and place as a sort of rhythm that is relational in its experience. Thus, we use the concept of rhythm to explore meaning-making regarding specific activities along a labour activation trajectory, arguing that it is necessary to go beyond the service user’s situation of today, and to also include the context of changing interactions over time. Lefebvre’s (2004) rhythm analysis enables us to trace the subjective meanings the service users make when simultaneously experiencing – or being beholden to – varying rhythms in conjunction with their labour activation activities. These rhythms may interfere or cohere with the rhythms of the service users’ everyday lives, and accordingly create experiences of interruptions and standstill or forward movement in the activation process.

## Rhythm analysis

Sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) idea of rhythm analysis speaks to the idea that rhythms structure our everyday lives. Different kinds of rhythms govern our everyday doings. These may include

everyday biological rhythms and those pertaining to the life-cycle more broadly; social rhythms, such as those pertaining to and connecting work- and family-life, or cultural and institutionalised rhythms, such as those pertaining to religious or educational activities. Such rhythms are temporally and spatially bound, though they may change or differ over time and place (Lefebvre, 2004). Some rhythms are more dominant than others – especially those consistent, ‘linear’ (progressive) everyday rhythms that are seemingly a ‘natural’ part of one’s life (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 18), for instance, rhythms related to one’s everyday work-life or family-life. Lefebvre distinguished between three primary rhythmic modes: (1) Polyrhythmia; rhythms that are diverse, but which coexist, for example, the rhythms of the lives of family abroad and one’s own work-life in Norway; (2) Eurhythmia; the ensembles of routine and intersecting rhythms that have normalising and naturalising qualities, for example, harmonised combinations of work- and family-life rhythms; and (3) Arrhythmias; discordant rhythms which create a sense of interruption in the everyday flow of life, for example, rhythms related to illness or to life course rupture or change (death, divorce, childbirth) and changes to one’s working life (finding work, losing work, changes to one’s working conditions). These modes are not entirely distinct from one another and may overlap. For instance, it is when everyday rhythms become irregular or discordant that we become conscious of the presence of rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 77).

With this focus on rhythms, Lefebvre challenged an understanding of temporality as something generalisable and substantive, and he suggested instead that it must be understood as ‘lived’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. xi) and ‘relative’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 10). In contrast to linear and progressive clock time, lived time and life trajectories are cyclical and changing, with interruptions. While Lefebvre’s analysis attended primarily to the lived rhythms experienced by people living in urban cities, we are focused on the lived rhythms of people participating in a labour activation programme, as these activation processes take place within and are shaped by rhythms imagined and expected within institutional contexts.

One’s understanding of time spent as one moves (or does not move) along a labour activation trajectory may be heavily framed by institutional expectations of the tempos inherent to the process. Furthermore, personal understanding of one’s movement ‘involves constructions of and relationships to both space and time’, including the ‘social practices of people-in-place’ constituting daily rhythms (Amit & Salazar, 2020, pp. 2–4). The rhythms associated with movement within institutions, such as participating in a labour activation programme, may also intersect or actively interfere with the individual’s own sense of everyday rhythms in other spheres, for instance, the rhythm of family-life. Hence, we start from the premise that time does not merely determine movement along a labour activation trajectory. Rather, time itself becomes a ‘form of action’ (Amit & Salazar, 2020, p. 3) – a rhythmic action related to experience, and which shapes the individual’s sense of time. In other words, a person’s *sense of time* is constructed with reference to personal life experiences.

In addition to referencing previous experiences, understandings of time and time spent along a trajectory may involve future ambitions, as well as the reconciliation of the rhythms posed or imposed by varying infrastructures, institutional regimes and social relations (Amit & Salazar, 2020). This appreciation of the dynamic relationship between time, place and experience provides a way to better understand the variation in how individuals respond to seemingly similar activation experiences. With this starting point of *time as actively constituted by experience*, we move deeper into an analysis of *how* service users make meaning of time spent on a labour activation trajectory – including *how* they understand not moving or ‘waiting’. A rhythm analysis that attends to biography and change over time enables us to understand the diversity of subjective meaning that may emerge related to seemingly similar experiences of ‘waiting’ in activation – waiting to become employed. Using Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of rhythms in our study facilitates analysis of how and why institutionalised labour activation policy, with predefined trajectories on an individual level, may create discordances and dissonance for some service users, while for others they may be experienced more harmonising in their processes towards labour market inclusion. Applying rhythm analysis to our two cases demonstrates how labour activation may be experienced

differently: as arrhythmic standstill or as eurhythmic forward movement, depending on biographical circumstance, previous experiences and time spent waiting in the welfare system.

## Methods

We draw on data from two separate fieldwork studies conducted in 2011 and 2013 in the Norwegian labour and welfare services (NAV), where we interviewed service users who participated in the qualification programme (QP). Both research projects were recommended by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

In the 2011-study, there were 17 women and 11 men, of which 14 persons had an immigrant background. In the 2013-study, there were 21 women and 13 men, of which 22 persons had an immigrant background. The participants had varying levels of education, from several years of primary to completed tertiary education. They also had varying professional backgrounds, ranging from very limited to extensive work history, also at upper levels of the labour market. Their civil status varied from single, married or divorced, with or without children and with current or previous partners living in or outside of Norway.

Our interviews focused on the participants' experiences from the QP, as well as those related to their life-situation and background, including previous work-life and educational experiences. Following a case study approach (Stake, 1995), we have selected two illustrative cases, one from each study. On the face of it, both have similar labour activation trajectories during their time in the QP. Each, however, possesses a distinct profile regarding their history of institutional encounters and opportunities, as past status, professional and personal history, geographical movement, and life course ruptures. Through a comparison of these two cases, we illustrate the dialectical and temporal dimensions of the labour activation process. We could have chosen different 'cases' or more 'cases' among our interviewees, with other profiles and other experiences, to demonstrate how individual experience constitutes time and how people make meaning of their time and activities in activation differently. Nevertheless, our two cases represent the diversity in profiles and experiences that we found among our interviewees. Finally, our goal is not to present generalised results or to produce typologies, but rather, to comprehensively analyse a few distinct cases to demonstrate how service users' variably make meaning of and respond to seemingly similar activation trajectories (Yin, 2009).

Using a narrative approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), we explore how the participants made meaning of their time in QP with a particular focus on their references to movements and interruptions before and during their participation in QP, as well as their sense of movement or flow, or standstill and interruptions in relation to their everyday lives. Interpreting the participants' experiences in using Lefebvre's concept of rhythms facilitates understanding of how their experiences subjectively constituted their sense of time as waiting or moving forward.

## The research context: the qualification programme (QP)

The QP is a national activation programme which aims to prevent poverty and social exclusion through the labour market inclusion of individuals who experience difficulties obtaining paid employment (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007a). The programme is regulated by the Norwegian Social Services Act (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2009) and is offered to service users receiving social assistance on a long-term basis or is long-term unemployed and not entitled to other income securing benefits. The programme is designed to resemble ordinary work-life, and participants must therefore comply with a fulltime programme of 37.5 h per week. All participants receive a fixed, taxable monthly benefit.

The QP represents a human resource development (HRD) approach offering measures such as training, courses and upskilling to enhance the service users' labour market prospects (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014). A fundamental principle is that activation measures and activities should be tailored and adjusted according to each participant's needs, abilities and limitations (Norwegian Ministry of

Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007b; Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011). Even though paid employment should be the goal for participation, enhanced quality of life and self-efficacy are included as important outcomes. Thus, an individual's programme could include a variety of activities, such as work placement (for example, in boutiques, coffee shops, food services, kindergartens, nursery homes, workshops, offices or schools), courses (in CV writing, work-life knowledge, clergy work, computer skills, care work skills or truck-driving), motivational training, social and physical training, medical treatment and recreational activities (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2012, §30). Moreover, individual plans should be flexible and adjustable to the participant's experiences and changing needs during the qualification process (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011, §1).

The QP has been said to represent a holistic and inclusion-oriented perspective (see also Caswell, 2006) towards labour activation. Nevertheless, the extent to which participants are offered individually tailored programmes and measures varies (Fossestøl et al., 2016). Even though the QP is a flexible programme, it also has an institutionalised defined trajectory with certain expected steps: from course-taking to work-training to work-placements, and finally, to job-seeking (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011). As we will describe below, this institutionally defined trajectory, in combination with the programme's time-limit, may stand in contrast to what service users may experience as complex personal trajectories.

## Findings

Activation programmes and measures are designed, also in Norway, with reference to a linear understanding of time, in which service users pass through a serial of predefined steps and events within a limited amount of time, from a few weeks up to a few years (Parliamentary Report No. 9, 2006–2007; Social Service Act, 2009), imagining that the linear rhythm of daily activity and self-production will help service users to feel a sense of forward movement, towards labour market integration. For service users, however, the labour activation trajectory tends to be experienced as a process with interruptions and changes, repetitions and movements forth and back between measures, and/or changes in situations and personal circumstances. Service users also bring personal histories and histories of movement through welfare institutions, which have bearing on the ways they understand their experiences today (Hansen & Gubrium, 2021). We analyse here how two service users each made varying meaning of the time they spent along their labour activation trajectories, with reference to diverse and/or contradicting everyday rhythms and contexts.

On the face of it, the two participants experienced similar labour activation trajectories. Both described a clash between institutionally imposed regulations and offers that kept them circulating in the lower levels of the welfare system rather than exiting into the labour market. Yet each drew on differing life experiences to constitute varying everyday rhythms, making different meanings of their labour activation experiences.

### *Clara: labour activation as a path to go back 'home'*

Clara, 39, had moved from Ethiopia to Norway with her husband as a UN refugee 14 years earlier. She was a Norwegian citizen, married, with two daughters, four and nine years old. She had had seven years of schooling and several years' experience working in hotels and cafeterias in Ethiopia. In Norway, she had been temporary employed in elderly care and in a cleaning business for three years. After her daughters were born, however, she had stayed at home to care for them, receiving parental and childcare benefits until the youngest was two years old. Clara's everyday activities during this period at home had shifted to family and childcare work. Hence, she described a feeling of loss of objectives and meaning in her daily life when her daughters had entered kindergarten and school. She drew on her past experience as a 'worker', when she noted the sense of interruption she felt: 'I was just sitting there, alone, doing nothing ... it's difficult not having a job'. This

lack of work activity and feeling of loss of meaning can be interpreted as a kind of stagnation felt in the rhythms of her daily life, a kind of arrhythmia in Lefebvre's (2004) terminology.

Clara's sense of rhythmic interruption in her life course was further enhanced when she attempted to re-enter the labour market, after learning that the regulations for working in elderly care had changed, further disrupting the possibility that she could return to the same field of work: 'I stayed at home with my children and the rules with the language test came along ... Now you need to have passed the language test level 3 ... I have passed level 2, but not level 3'. The time outside the labour market represented both an interruption in her daily rhythms and a clash between her life course and the changing rules of the labour market. While Clara had already experienced a clash between her former everyday family-life rhythm feeling a loss of meaning about her being inactive sitting alone at home, and her former working life activities and rhythms, the new language rules further interfered with her sense of everyday rhythm. We interpret Clara's situation as a clash between rhythms – an arrhythmia between those rhythms of her everyday life in the family with childcare obligations and the changing rhythms of the labour market requiring language skills proficiency.

Nevertheless, in contrast to sitting alone at home without the possibility of improving her labour market prospects, Clara described how participation in the QP represented a new sense of rhythm in her everyday life. The programme offered language training, as well as courses and work trainings and participants were expected to be actively engaged in programme activities 7.5 h a day, five days a week. Clara described a sense of flow and movement in her daily life which she attributed to the programme's framework with full-day activity, just like the norm in standard Norwegian work-life. As she noted:

I wake up early, and "full systems a-go!," preparing the children to go to school and kindergarten, and then I go straight to work ... in the QP I feel as if I have a job ... If you have a plan you wake up early, serve the children and off to work, you come back and pick up the children, so there are all these routines that follow. If you do nothing, there is no plan and no routine.

At first glance, Clara's time spent in the programme represented continued time waiting to move forward and into the labour market. Yet Clara made meaning of her time in the programme with reference to her past identities and everyday rhythms. She emphasised that her day had once again assumed a more regular, busy work routine that intersected well with, and in fact, helped add structure to pre-established family rhythm, facilitating a sense of eurhythmia.

Nevertheless, for Clara entering QP also represented an aspiration to assume her life course rhythms with a new career trajectory. Given Clara's level of Norwegian language skills, she would not be able to quickly access a job in elderly care. Therefore, her QP caseworker suggested that she instead shift focus to another sector, suggesting work training in a cantina as a possible better fit. Clara described her sense of reckoning with this change in career trajectory, noting,

Now I'm hoping for work in a cantina. I used to work in elderly care, but with the level three (language) requirements, I turned around and thought to myself, "why not the cantina, I'm okay with that," because the language three test was too difficult for me.

Clara described how the QP was especially important as a means to move out of a stagnated sense of her life course rhythms, as well as moving out of a stagnated sense of her everyday rhythms. Instead of continuing in a standstill position, she turned around to what was possible to achieve by changing her expectations about her work-life career. Hence, she used the 'waiting' time in QP actively and productively (Rotter, 2016) to move forward, both by turning around for a new opportunity in working life, as well as by shaping new routines and rhythms in her family-life.

Nonetheless, referring to her previous work trajectory in her home country, Clara felt, all in all, that her career prospects in Norway represented a 'step back' – to cafeteria work. In this broader sense, Clara may have emphasised her time in QP as a standstill or a movement backward. Nevertheless, she emphasised throughout the interview that the most important thing was to *have* a job – for



her family to live a decent life in Norway, but moreover to be able to one day return to her home country. As she noted,

I hope to be able to return one day. I miss my home country very much ... but it's difficult to travel when your economy is poor. That's why I need to work. That is my main goal ... I'd really like to go back home ...

Hence, Clara's sense of the time waiting to enter the labour market, during which she 'turned around' to enter a new professional pathway, intersected with an existential form of waiting (Hage, 2009) – waiting to return to her home country. While in a seemingly standstill position, in exile and still unemployed, her very presence in the QP and her view of work as a tool toward a larger life goal, to return to her home country, instead represented a step which she described as a forward movement.

### ***Kari Anne: labour activation as re-affirmation of limited possibilities***

Kari Anne, 39, was married, had two children, and had lived her entire life in the same town. She had limited work experience but had a formal certificate as a 'chef/waiter' and had also taken 'many courses in office administration' over the years. Despite these credentials, Kari Anne had not found work and had received social assistance for six years before entering the QP. When describing the QP, she contrasted this with the rhythm of being a social assistance 'client', a time she described as one of intense stagnation. As she noted,

The social assistance office ... Year after year after year after year after year ... you just have to get used to saying it. Yeah, "I'm not a burden for other people" ... To be dependent on NAV, year after year, is that really anything I should be proud of?

Kari Anne described the sense of arrhythmia she felt as time moved forward while she was reminded – by NAV as well as by society – that she was nonetheless standing still in the system and outside the labour market. She challenged the broader expectations that had caused this sense of arrhythmia, noting, 'It's been 8 years now (applying for jobs). The kids were actually small (when I started), and now they're bigger. I have a (15-year-old) who will soon be confirmed'. Through the interview, she resisted the idea of standing still by emphasising how her everyday rhythms during this time had, in fact, been quite busy, noting nonetheless that she had spent far more time searching for work and studying to find work than being formally employed.

For Kari Anne, the QP had represented a way to establish a better life rhythm. But the QP also represented a crossroads of sorts, a choice made between two pathways of possibility that had existed, before. Entering the QP had meant pushing aside the plans she had had to move to Denmark, nearer to her sister, and a potential job offer. Both options had represented an opportunity for movement forward, for gaining positive momentum, both in terms of work and in terms of a change of scene. She described the dilemma she had faced, noting,

I was thinking of (moving to Denmark) two years ago, because at that point I had the money for it. But then ... we had a big meeting, with the boss at NAV, about how it wasn't exactly smart to move ... They convinced me not to move.

Kari Anne contrasted the forward movement promised when entering the programme, emphasising that, once in the programme, it was clear that she had chosen the wrong pathway. She contrasted the failed promise of meaningful activity in everyday programme participation, to what might have been a job opportunity in Denmark. As she noted,

I thought that the program they offered was really, really good, really nice, and that gave me a hope. I had to apply for a tax card (looks proud, then laughs) and that was a good feeling, actually. But now it's been almost two years and, I feel that I've been lied to. The Qualification Program doesn't live up to what it stands for. Yeah, they say they'll help you find a job. They say that you'll get counselling that's individualized. No. You just have to deliver the timesheet and then you get your pay, and then you just have to take care of yourself.

For Kari Anne, her sense of arrhythmia from the programme had been heightened to such an extent that she no longer described moving to Denmark as an option. After having had several job trainings, including in a cantina, she was nearing the programme's finish, but had not received a job offer. Kari Anne described the sense of bewildered disconnect she felt when applying for jobs while in the QP, noting:

It's just one rejection after another ... I've applied to around 400 jobs. Everything from nursery schools to waiting tables to washing. Even driver, taxi driver, you know. Everything, actually. And I (sighs heavily) ... don't know why I get rejected, actually. I really try to hold my motivation up and everything, give a good impression, to the next interview [laughs] ... but I don't manage, really, I don't feel that "Yes! Tomorrow's a new day!" [laughs] I don't really feel anything.

She actively contrasted her sense of busy activity in the everyday, constantly applying for jobs, with a larger sense of standing still, while life continued with increasingly limited options. In contrast to Clara, who described her time in the QP as a time to reflect, and potentially create new rhythms, for Kari Anne the programme represented a lost opportunity and reaffirmed her identity as 'unemployed'. In this sense, the arrhythmia she experienced represented a heightened sense of stagnation.

Kari Anne also described a sense of arrhythmia with reference to ambitions that were deeply embedded in the everyday norms of her local community. When making meaning of her own labour activation trajectory, she described how it felt to be jobless in a country like Norway, where 'there is probably only 2% unemployment'. She described herself as being 'on the outside' of her local community, and as being surrounded by people 'who don't understand ... who have a job ... who are self-employed and have two cars. And a cottage. And a boat ... and money to vacations south'. Within this relational context, she experienced her life and identity in stark contrast to the everyday eurhythmia anticipated by local norms. In contrast, the rhythms of her days, weeks, months and years were marked by a keen sense of arrhythmia, the rhythms of work-seeking and motherhood both compromised. As she noted,

It's a long time since I've had a day where I've thought things are good. A long time. (I) constantly have to plan. Think about the bills that will come. Soon, I will be hungry again. ... My god, I don't look forward to that. Is there anyone who looks forward to having to be hungry to save the food for your kids? There's no help to find, really. Nowhere (breathes heavily).

Kari Anne also contrasted the sense of eurhythmia that she *should* have felt, living in Norway, and now, after two years in QP, with an existential sense that her identity was to be categorised as 'outside the normal'. She described an experience walking through a graveyard, looking at gravestones, recalling: 'Many of (the gravestones) had etched on them the type of job the person had had, when they lived. And then I thought, when I die, what will (my gravestone) say? Unemployed – Kari Anne Johannesen?' For Kari Anne, the arrhythmic nature of the waiting time in QP had reached a metaphorical end – death.

## Discussion

Researchers have demonstrated how labour activation trajectories are by no means linear pathways following a clear and predictable line of causes and effect. Trajectories may be comprised in complicated ways. Varying trajectory patterns, as well as interruptions, changes and transitions, have been reported to determine whether a client experiences progression, deterioration, stagnation or derailment (Danneris, 2018; Dwyer, 2009; Gjersøe & Leseth, 2021; Hage, 2009; Rotter, 2016; Vaughn et al., 2020). The research to date has mostly focused on the *whats* of such trajectories – on the make-up of varying trajectory compositions, as experienced by service users. Our aim has been to shift focus to the *hows* of labour activation trajectories, exploring how service users understand the rhythms of labour activation, with relation to their personal histories, their life courses and their institutional movements.

For Clara and Kari Anne, the experience of ‘waiting in the system’ meant much more than just standing still. On the face of it, both had similar labour activation trajectories while in the QP: Both had had several job trainings, including in a cantina. Both were at or near the programme’s finish, and neither had received a job offer. But the meaning of ‘waiting’ was shaped by the varying rhythms experienced during programme participation, as these rhythms were understood with reference to the rest of their lives.

For Clara, participation in the QP had enabled a break from previous and difficult everyday rhythms. She had a sense of re-establishing and recovering a more harmonious eurhythmia between her family and work-life (Lefebvre, 2004), after years of discordance due to immigration, childbirth and childcare responsibilities, as well as due to a changed labour market. The institutional discourse of qualification and movement closer to the labour market better matched Clara’s ambitions of finding work to sometime in the future be able to move back to Ethiopia, and she remained hopeful about her continuing labour activation progress. Clara’s case shows that staying still in the system does not only mean stagnation or endless waiting, but rather depends on how the service user makes meaning of the time. For some, like for Clara, ‘waiting’ may be understood as active and productive time (Rotter, 2016). Kari Anne, unlike Clara, did not refer to an extensive history of everyday rhythms associated with working or a potential future outside Norway when making meaning of her time in QP. For her, the contrast between institutional promises and expectations and the bewildering reality of still being out of work and no longer having the opportunity to move to Denmark meant she understood ‘waiting’ while in QP negatively, as the continuation and confirmation of an arrhythmic stagnation that she had experienced for many years. Kari Anne understood her activation as wasted time (Gubrium & Leirvik, 2021), as repeated work placements had not changed her life – neither in terms of skills enhancement nor employment. Hence, she understood her time in the QP as a time of existential waiting (Hage, 2009) – as a sense that her essential identity was arrhythmic.

Our findings demonstrate the ways in which service users refer to their personal and institutional histories when making sense of their everyday rhythms, resulting in varying understandings about seemingly similar experiences in the same labour activation programme. Service users within a labour activation programme such as the QP often spend ‘time waiting’ – waiting to be employed, to earn the necessary certificate to pursue a specific career, to enter the ‘right’ work practice position, or to receive a medical diagnosis enabling them to move within the system to a category where they are entitled to permanent benefits. However, their sense of what waiting means varies.

Understandings of waiting are constituted by differing rhythms, some which intersect or act in harmony (eurhythmias), some of which represent conflict, interruption, interference or stagnation (arrhythmias). Such rhythms are constructed sensations, made meaningful by service users as they draw on personal experiences – changing and everyday identities, relationships, activities and aspirations – with reference to the entire life course. Service user rhythms are also constituted in the face of institutional, policy and labour market rules, regulations and expectations. Service users make meaning of their experiences of activation in relation to varied understandings of time, rhythms and waiting. However, they negotiate the meaning of these experiences with reference to institutionally predefined and expected labour activation trajectories. Notwithstanding, the institutionally predefined trajectory may stand in stark contrast to what service users may experience as complex personal trajectories. On a policy level, labour activation is embedded with a dominant rhetoric of individualisation for the service user and of responsabilisation for the social worker (Daguerre, 2007). This arbitrariness and ambiguity – between the individualised and the institutionalised and predefined – may create a sense of dissonance or standstill on an individual level – but not for all (Hansen & Natland, 2017). For some service users, the institutionalised predefined trajectory is in harmony and vibrates with their life course and everyday rhythms and ambitions.

Hence, to understand labour activation policy, we need a framework that also includes the individual level. By applying Lefebvre’s rhythm analysis on an individual level, we have demonstrated how service users’ meaning-making, including a focus on how diverse life (course) rhythms, may

intersect and create complexity in peoples' lives. Such a focus facilitates a better understanding of how service users understand and differently respond to labour activation measures and seemingly similar experiences. Hence, studying labour activation from the perspective of service users' meaning-making is also important for policy making and for practice. The findings from this study not only demonstrate the problematic of institutionalised and predefined activation trajectories on an individual level. The findings also shed light on how labour activation on the policy level has become an enforcing straitjacket, which may create unintended negative consequences both for individual service users who keep circulating in the system, and for the social workers who have the nearly impossible mission of fulfilling the activation policy goal: moving service users forward into the labour market.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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