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Active social policies revisited by social workers

L'interprétation par le personnel du travail social des politiques sociales dites « actives »

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Social policies are described as active on the basis of formal legal provisions, or on the grounds of expenditure data. Using the notion, set forth by Lipsky, M. [(1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemnas of the individual in public services* (2010 ed.). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation] as well as by several subsequent authors, that social workers who implement policies actually play a role in (re) defining them, the present article intends to explore the way in which active social policies are implemented in a Swiss canton. On the basis of an original study, we show that, on the one hand, social workers tend to view activation as a distant perspective – which means they often do no put it into practice right away. And activation, when social workers do deem it to be necessary, takes on different meanings depending on whether they are dealing with young people or with mothers. As a result, the actual meaning of the word activation varies – a fact that scholars who focused solely on formal/legal activation policies were not in a position to observe.

Keywords: Active social policies; Switzerland; implementation of social policies

La qualification d'une politique sociale comme « active » repose le plus souvent sur la seule analyse de la législation ou des dépenses publiques. Or, les travaux de Lipsky, M. [(1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemnas of the individual in public services* (2010 ed.). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation] et de différent·e·s auteur·e·s après lui ont montré que les travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux qui mettent en œuvre les politiques sociales participent à les (re)définir. Partant de cet analyse, cet article examine comment des politiques sociales qualifiées d'actives sont implémentées dans un canton suisse. Sur la base d'une étude empirique originale, nous montrons que le personnel du travail social ne pas voit pas toujours l'activation comme possible, au moins à court ou moyen terme, ce qui signifie que l'activation n'est souvent pas mise en œuvre. Et lorsqu'elle est considérée comme possible, l'activation prend un sens différent suivant le groupe social auquel elle s'adresse, ce que nous montrons à partir du cas de politiques sociales actives destinées aux jeunes et aux mères. Cela signifie que le sens même du terme activation change, un fait qui a le plus souvent échappé aux travaux qui ne se basent que sur la dimension légale des politiques sociales.

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Introduction

Many scholars argue that activation has been at the heart of Central and Northern European social policies at least for the past 20 years (see e.g. Bonoli, 2013; Taylor-Gooby, 2009). According to them, activation sets new goals for social policies; they are no longer primarily aimed at the compensation of lost income, but at improving the employability profile of individuals through a wide variety of measures, such as helping them to perfect their job-seeking techniques, providing them with various forms of training, and offering therapeutic support or opportunities to acquire professional experience. In short, active social policies of all types (job creation schemes, social insertion programmes, education, job search programmes, workfare, etc. (Bonoli, 2013, p. 20)) primarily focus on changing beneficiaries and modifying their profiles in order to make them better adapted to the requirements of the existing labour market.

Yet the conclusions reached by these scholars about a generalised turn towards activation is empirically questionable, because it is solely based on formal/legal activation policies, or on the examination of expenditure data; it does not rely on an examination of their actual implementation by social workers. Our point is that no generalised turn towards activation can take place if measures are not systematically implemented by social workers in the field; this is because, 'transformations do not occur solely on the level of political decision-making or are transferred top-down to administrative structures' (Hauss, 2014, p. 657). We subscribe to the premise that social workers who implement social policies are policy makers, insofar as they actually (re)define policies through their actions; 'in important ways [public policy] is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street level workers' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 12). We also argue that the agents who implement social policies are social workers in the broader sense, in accordance with the seminal editorial in the European Journal of Social Work that stated that social work 'should not refer to a specific and narrow set of practices but can serve more abstractly as a concept covering a wide range of social services with pedagogical, social and organisational dimensions' (Otto & Lorenz, 1998, p. 2).

As Van Berkel and Van der AA (2012) have demonstrated, 'in Europe, […] only a few studies of activation's front-line have been published [unlike] in the US [where] there is a more developed tradition of examining the actual implementation of welfare-to-work reforms (Henman & Fenger, 2006; Jewell, 2007; Watkins-Hayes, 2009)' (p. 494). In Europe, scholars who have approached this topic from a psycho-sociological perspective argue that the implementation of activation policies is influenced by their perception of recipients' deservingness (Kallio & Kouvo, 2014), or by their view of the causes having led to poverty (Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio, & Erola, 2013). Many sociological studies focus on issues about the manoeuvring room open for discretionary decision-making (see e.g. Dubois, 2010; Hertz, Martin, & Valli, 2004; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2002; Steinmetz, 2014; Thorén, 2008; Van Berkel & Van der AA, 2012; Wright, 2003). Some scholarly analysts of social work argue that the discretionary allocation of resources or measures is part of the professional nature of social work, in line with the principles of social work's Global Agenda

(Hessle, 2014), while others state that discretion has been curtailed by rules and regulations derived from the activation paradigm (for a detailed discussion, see Evans & Harris, 2004); some state that the traditional 'professional reflexivity is currently in danger of becoming more and more substituted by a technical-rational intervention agency which is still called "social work", but represents a mode of intervention which is reduced to finding ways to achieve predetermined goals' (Kessl, 2009, p. 309).

The original character of our approach resides in our decision to focus neither on the psycho-sociological motivation of social workers, nor on the room for discretion at their disposal when implementing active social policies; rather, we have examined their conceptions of activation policies. These policies are clearly founded upon the hypothesis that the causes of lack of employment are internal in character, since they look to the internal structure of individuals experiencing insecurity not only for reasons to explain their precarious condition but also for remedies that may allow them to rise up from it (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988). We will focus on how this norm of internality is used by social workers. In our perspective, inspired by pragmatic critical sociology (Boltanski, 2011), social workers are seen as analysts of their own professional context and of the social forces that shape social reality. From our point of view, the redefinition of activation policies carried out by social workers is essential for a true understanding of the impact of these policies in the field.

After introducing our empirical data, we will first examine whether social workers systematically implement activation, and if they do not, why not. Second, we will examine their use of the norm of internality when implementing active social policies with two distinct groups of beneficiaries targeted by specific social policies: young people on the one hand, and families on the other. In our conclusion, we will come back to the seminal interrogation of this article: do active social policies remain active when they are implemented in the field?

Methodological notes

The empirical material upon which our analysis is founded is comprised, on the one hand, of legal prescriptions, statements and parliamentary interventions defining social interventions and benefits, and, on the other, of original data collected through semi-structured interviews.

In Switzerland, the constitution guarantees a right to social assistance; it cannot be denied except in cases of fraud, or of refusal to provide the requested documentation. It is implemented differently in each canton. We have focused our analysis on canton Vaud, as it has been at the forefront, in the last few years, of the introduction of active social policies in Switzerland in the field of social assistance. In the past decade, canton Vaud has introduced a whole range of new active policies: a new law on Financial Assistance was passed (2003), introducing a 'Revenu d'insertion RI' clearly inspired by the French model of activation (the 'Revenu minimum d'insertion RMI'). A programme focusing on a category called 'young adults experiencing difficulties' was implemented in 2009, as the local response to the European concern about not in education, employment or training (Tabin & Perriard, 2014). Finally, a law specifically designed for 'low income families' with children under 16 was introduced in 2010, based on the type of social investment rhetoric (Tabin, 2016) also found in the former debates about the RI. These active social policies have come into force and

may be viewed as the basic documents meant to structure the interventions of professionals charged with tasks of social integration (Smith, 2001).

We also conducted, between 2011 and 2013, 56 semi-structured interviews with social workers (17 men and 39 women) charged with implementing these new pieces of social legislation. In our corpus of interviewees, 21 professionals are social work graduates; most of the others hold a degree in social sciences (sociology, psychology, etc.). This proportion of other graduates is rather high. It must be noted that social workers are not required to register with a regulatory instance and that there is no recognised social work professional body in Switzerland, unlike in many other countries (Hussein, 2011). As a consequence, the rate of social workers in Switzerland employed without a social work diploma averages 70% (Frey, Braun, & Waeber, 2011).

In our study, the answers given by social workers questioned about their practice do not significantly differ according to their professional qualification; this result does not confirm Lipsky's (1980) hypothesis that professional social workers respond in specific ways to policy mandates, since they have similar professional values. 'The theoretical assumption behind such reasoning is that trained social workers would be guided by shared professional principles' (Thorén, 2008, p. 32), or by shared professional ethics (Kjørstad, 2005). This is unlikely to be the case in a country like Switzerland where professional principles are primarily sustained in the field and not carried by a strong professional association.

In order to obtain a broad representation of the range of activation programmes set up by the administration to implement existing legislation, we interviewed persons working in all active programmes recently set up for young people and for families; one social worker was interviewed in each programme. Most interviews (34) were conducted with professionals working in structures providing services to young people; 22 interviews involved professionals providing support to parents, implementing measures meant to help families on financial assistance to either find jobs or increase their earnings.

We asked social workers to describe in detail three social situations involving beneficiaries they saw as 'emblematic' of their work and to explain to us why they viewed them in this way. We chose not to define what we meant by 'emblematic situations', in order to give interviewees an opportunity to freely express what they saw as the core characteristics of iconic situations they encountered in their work; this enabled us to begin engaging with them in a discussion aimed at allowing us to understand their conceptions of their own professional actions.

One-seventy different situations were presented to us in total. Fifty-four of the cases concerned men (32%), 91 women (54%) and 25 involved couples (15%). Professionals working with 'youth experiencing difficulties' presented us with almost equal numbers of situations involving each gender (52 women, 48 men); this may be seen as an indication of the lack of sexual differentiation in this age category. This finding is in stark contrast with the field of work with families with children under 16, where professionals described 39 situations concerning women, 25 involving couples and only 6 that were focused on men. On the basis of the cases they presented to us, we were able to conduct in-depth discussions with our interviewees about their interventions.

Interviews took place at the interviewees' workplace and lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. We carried out 'practice discourse analysis' (Olivier de Sardan, 2008) and analysed the material in a classical manner by transcription, pre-analysis, code

definition and thematic saturation using TAMS analyser software (Text Analysis Markup System).[1] We tagged all the interviews to allow us to analyse differences related to profession, training, institution and gender of the interviewees. We then looked for distinct concepts and categories in the data and recorded first-level open codes. The present article makes use of discursive elements coded under 'intervention', that is, quotations that describe social interventions in one of the situations presented. This code, labelled 'intervention', includes 546 social workers' citations, from which higher-level codes were derived. In this article, we present 22 quotations from 18 different social workers, carefully selected as representative of these higher-level codes.

Activation? 'Nothing is that urgent'

The new policies implemented by canton Vaud in 2003 in the field of income support (RI) articulated the use of social inclusion measures (various psychosocial and educational support) and professional integration programmes for financial assistance recipients, 'with the goal not only of preventing social exclusion but also of avoiding, or at least limiting, further increases in social welfare costs'.[2] The explicit objective of this social investment policy is to make sure that recipients leave the programme, since it is charged with 'preparing current beneficiaries to exit the welfare system, whilst temporarily providing them with financial assistance and supporting them by means of appropriate social work interventions'.[3] As we can see, these arrangements are far from 'passive', since they are designed to avoid in all possible cases the long-term provision of financial assistance: article 40 of the 2003 law states specifically that beneficiaries must 'attempt by all possible means to regain their autonomy'.[4]

How is this goal implemented by social workers in charge of integration measures? This is what we will examine at first, on the basis of quotations taken from the cases presented in the interviews we conducted.

> At first, we didn't do any job applications, we straightened out the administrative situation. (Éliane, employed in a social enterprise for 18–25 year-olds)
>
> It's the kind of case in which there is such an incredible number of parameters interacting, it's really interesting […] and at the same time it's quite disturbing because often you don't know how things should be approached, from what side.
>
> […] How is it possible to help this girl go forward with all the worries she has in her life? (Lea, employed in a public social service for 18–25 year-olds)
>
> A whole lot of doctors' bills, insurance bills, things to bring up to date, to catch up, to try to pay one way or another. […] Now she is all up to date […], so I think that's what has led her now to be able to start on something again. (Marta, employed in an integration programme for families)

These three quotations are typical of the discourse of our interviewees, since 52 social workers out of the 54 interviewed mentioned social problems delaying activation (code: intervention). They hold the view that the problems their clients experience can require moving activation goals further into the future. Non activation-focused, or 'classic' social work – to use the term coined by Castel (2005) – is then viewed as necessary; for the most part, it takes the form of socio-pedagogical interventions that fit perfectly into the definition of social work of the International Federation of Social Work (2000),[5] while not pointing to the responsibility of individuals with regard to the situation in which they find themselves.

This means that active measures, which are deemed most urgent by political actors and very rarely questioned by the social workers we interviewed, only make it to the top of the professionals' agenda when they think that their clients are actually ready and able to come on board. Activation, including the implementation of 'social' rather than 'employment' measures, is seen as the next step – and not the first step – of the intervention process, as we can see in the following quotes:

> Nothing is that urgent. […] We are on the bottom rung of the social scale, so they can't fall any lower, so to speak. (Léon, employed in a public social service)

> Seeing how difficult things were for her […] I told her: 'It would be good if we could talk for a while about how you can deal with all this stress, […] how to live through all these difficult situations and how you could bring all this out […].' And that's how, little by little, with trust […] she could actually hear that setting up this programme for her would be a good thing. (Séverine, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

These quotes show that social workers carry out a social diagnosis; they decide whether activation is possible in the short term or whether it must be delayed. The temporality chosen for activation reveals – as in a photographic negative – the normative criteria that define the figure of the 'employable adult': a person who has suitable housing, who is healthy, socially and economically stable, that is, who can give priority to employment. Social workers thus interpret the normative framework in the light of their own professional priorities. This fact could not come to light within studies restricted to an analysis of formal activation policies. Distinctions are drawn between two types of beneficiaries: the ones who are 'activable' right away, and the others. Yet, the borders between the two categories are blurred (Lessenich, 2011) since, according to our interviewees, each person must be accompanied towards activation along his or her own individual path, which implies looking for client-specific ways to achieve predetermined goals, as Kessl (2009) put it. Pressure towards activation is also applied, as we see in the following quotations:

> We said […] to this girl: 'Now it's time for disability insurance. […] We don't know what to do anymore […]' She said: 'No, I don't want to go on disability. […]. Give me another possibility but I'm not going on disability!' […] We were able to play on that a bit.' (Raoul, employed in a public social programme for 18–25 year-olds)

> 'Every time she said to me: 'That, I can't do!' I said: '[…] You can't? Let's get an appointment at the psychologist then!' […] Right away, […] she would try and demonstrate to me that she was able to do it. (Gaston, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

According to our interviewees, pressure applied may, however, be milder[6] in nature than expected according to the literature about activation interventions (Van Berkel & Van der AA, 2012); this is undoubtedly a consequence of the fact that the right to social assistance benefits cannot be entirely denied, since they are guaranteed by the Swiss constitution. This does not mean that no sanctions are ever implemented. Yet an in-depth understanding of the nature of the social problems that led clients to having to rely on public assistance does emerge from the expressed views of the social workers we interviewed; it implies a level of tolerance for certain types of behaviour: some missed appointments, or somewhat patchy attendance in the programmes

in which clients have been enrolled, are tolerated; less than strict implementation of some other rules is also the norm. Understanding the problems encountered by the client population, which is at the core of the social work approach, explains why the activation agenda is often delayed.

The following statement synthesises how activation is (re)defined by our interviewees: activation is a horizon; it cannot always be reached in the short term. The implementation of active social policies does draw lines of demarcation, however blurred they might be, between clients, reserving activation to people who are considered fit to be activated. This finding gives activation a less predominant role and demonstrates that non activation-focused social policies continue to be implemented. Scholars who solely focus on the turn towards activation through an analysis conducted at policy-level only miss this point: activation is not systematically implemented nor is it deemed appropriate for every situation.

Moreover, temporality is not the only factor at play in this (re)definition of activation policies by social workers. The modalities that characterise the implementation of these policies also vary according to different populations of beneficiaries because social workers view the specific problems facing these groups of clients in different ways.

Activation: 'is it possible?'

Vaud canton's integration policies aim at a range of target populations defined in various pieces of legislation; at the time of our study (2011–2014) two target groups of pilot programmes can be identified. On the one hand, we find persons aged 18–25 who are receiving public assistance and are neither employed nor enrolled in a training programme. Under the heading of 'young adults experiencing difficulties', this group is – in Switzerland like in other countries – the primary target of active social policies (Tabin & Perriard, 2014; Lima, 2012)[7]. For this group, legal prescriptions emphasise professional training as the main path towards employment. The model of activation policy used for this group is clearly the Human Capital Development as defined by many scholars (see e.g. Nybom, 2011). The other group is comprised of families with children under 16 who are beneficiaries of the RI, for whom a global increase of the employment rate of parents is viewed as a goal. For this group, the underlying model of activation more difficult to identify, since no specific target is set in terms of a global increase of the employment rate. Since political responses define both the content of the social problem at hand and the modalities of its resolution (Bacchi, 2009; Gusfield, 1980), analysing the (re)definition work carried out by social workers with these two different groups enables us to better understand whether the causes of the absence of employment are seen by social workers as internal in character.

Young adults: 'actors of their own projects'

Our analysis shows that the activation of 'young adults experiencing difficulties' is founded upon the compulsory elaboration of a *project;* this normative requirement is in accordance with the norm of internality (the main problem of young adults being defined as their lack of professional goals). Whilst our interviewees are aware of how difficult it may turn out to be for some of their clients to have plans, or projects, because – as we have seen – of family problems, of chaotic school careers, etc., the

individual project remains the cornerstone of the professionals' interventions in the field of activation; it is mentioned by 29 out of the 34 social workers interviewed who were active in the field of youth services (code: intervention). A project *must* exist, as the following quotes make clear:

> We would like him to be able to propose things, [for him] to be active, to grab hold of his own project. We really try, as far as possible […] to get them to be actors of their own projects. (Régine, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds).

> It must come from him, it has to be him that asks for things. […] Motivation [should] increases little by little […]. He isn't ready to enter a dynamic process of training. (Julie, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

> You can take a horse to water but you can't make him drink. So, from time to time, there just nothing to be done. (Simon, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

Yet the task at hand for social workers entails not only convincing 'young adults experiencing difficulties' to share their view of the necessity of elaborating a professional training project for themselves, that is, to bring them in line with legal provisions attributing training measures to this group, but also to get them to formulate a project that is compatible with the requirements of the job market; this very frequently requires a *cooling out*, to use the term coined by Goffman (1952):

> The first thing we look at is, whether the project […] is feasible. […] And if it is, what will it cost? […] If it isn't possible, what alternatives do we have? (Maude, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

> We get everybody to prepare a plan B. So, in principle, if a failure occurs, we fall back on plan B. (Régine, employed in a social integration programme for 18–25 year-olds)

Most often, dual school/enterprise programmes (apprenticeships) at the secondary educational level are recommended, with the shortest training programmes being proposed to those who have the least successful previous school careers. We are no doubt faced here with a 'Matthew Effect' (Merton, 1968), that is, we observe that social workers tend to give more to those who already have the most.

In order to get their clients to agree that a 'realistic' project is best for them, social workers use persuasion; however, they resort to stronger techniques when persuasion does not suffice:

> He is required to turn in to me, before midday every Monday, the evidence of what he has done to look for a job in order for his weekly allowance [the money he receives from public assistance] to be validated. It works, [but] the quality of job applications […] is not compatible with what is required by the labour market. (Marco, employed in a public social service programme for 18–25 year-olds)

> I am going to put in for sanctions if she does not come to her next appointment and she is going to lose 25% of her allowance[8] […]. Maybe she will react, it is a bit of a drag but we are sort of stuck. (Armand, employed in a public social service programme for 18–25 year-olds)

The (re)definition of active social policies by social workers consist in getting the 'young adult experiencing difficulties' to come up with a professional training project (motivation being the motto here); they then have to ensure that the project is as realistic as possible, and to accompany beneficiaries on their way towards it, sometimes in a rather directive manner, using available social measures (12 out of

the 34 social workers active in the youth services field we interviewed mention this point (code: intervention)).

This (re)definition is characteristic of active social policies and coherent with the internal norm of activation policies. However, the requirement that the project should be as realistic as possible leads our interviewees to expressing their – frequently critical – opinions about the characteristics of the labour market. This is the main reason why social interventions are not systematically coercive in nature either since, from the professionals' point of view, opportunities for integration into the job market are limited. The social workers do take into account their own assessment of the prevailing social conditions. Whilst, as stated above from a sociological point of view, activation is founded upon the belief that the causes of lack of employment are internal in character, we see here that the issue of the internality of problems is assessed in a rather nuanced way in the cases presented by the social workers interviewed.

Families and activation: 'but there is no childcare available!'

In the case of families with children under 16, social workers interpret the nature of difficulties encountered by their clients rather differently, as demonstrated by the two following quotes concerning this group:

> The goal of the program is to improve their financial situation. (Joséphine, employed in a social integration programme for families)

> As a mother, she will only be considered as fit for employment if she has a childcare solution. And this solution is very difficult to find nowadays. (Clara, employed in a public social service programme for 18–25 year-olds, but speaking of the case of a young mother)

For this group, social workers define the goal of their intervention not primarily as the implementation of a professional training plan (such a plan is mentioned by only 6 out of the 22 social workers working with families we interviewed (code: intervention)) for their clients, but rather as an increase in family income. In order to reach this goal, in line with legal requirements, social workers use two main strategies. The first is clearly illustrated by the following quotations:

> If she has a low salary, it's of course due to her employer but it is also due to her in a way, because she admits she has found it difficult all these years […] to ask for a raise. […] So we'll see if she has the courage to do it. At the same time though, we put ourselves in her place. (Casimir, employed in a social integration programme, working with families)

> I explained to her that we could find a coach for her […] in order to help her improve her financial situation, either by helping her to increase her work hours, or by changing something in her job. And she bought this […] right away. (Marta, employed in a social integration programme for families)

This first strategy concerns persons who do have a job but do not earn enough money to support their families; it entails getting them to ask their employer for a raise or an increase in their work hours (respectively mentioned by 2 and 4 of the social workers involved in family programmes out of the 22 interviewed (code: intervention)). The issue of the internal nature of the problem does not really arise in these cases; working conditions are described as the issue. Moreover, social workers do feel that this course of action involves risks (clients may run the risk of losing their job if

they do ask for higher wages), or – as we can see from the quotation that follows – that it is clearly unrealistic in some cases:

> This lady, we both knew from the start that with so many children she would not be able to be self-sufficient. […] Never … She'd have to be making 10 000 Swiss francs [8200 €] a month and […] there's no way she could ever do that. (Daniela, employed in a public social service, working with families)

The second strategy, used much more frequently, entails attempting to raise the global rate of employment in families; most of the time this means getting mothers to go (back) to work, which is consistent with the goals set for the programme by the legislator ('conciliation' is mentioned by 19 social workers working with families out of the 22 interviewed (code: intervention)). The necessity of getting mothers into – or back to – employment is stated again and again by social workers. But this is easier said than done, as illustrated by the two following quotations:

> She is prepared to do anything, but she is too close to her children, she is not ready to leave them. (Léon, employed in a public social service, working with families)

> In truth she can't imagine […] working full-time […] With this person, […] it's always a matter of […] what compromises to make. […] So what compromises are to be made between a job where […] one has to keep to a set schedule, […] and spending less time with one's kids in order to work more? (Samantha, employed in a social integration programme for families)

The 'tensions between the values of home and the values of paid work' exemplified by these quotes illustrate the 'practical and moral dilemmas' faced by families today in Switzerland – as in America – 'as they struggle to both support their families financially and to care for their children' (Hays, 2003, pp. 15, 13). The field of tension, shared by most of our interviewees, lies between the goal of activation policies (employment) and the traditional family values they seem to share (a mother should spend most of her time with her young children). Social workers show considerable empathy for difficulties experienced by mothers, especially when their children are still very young: they understand that it is difficult for mothers to leave their children to go to work and abandon their role of stay-at-home moms, not only psychologically, but also because of the lack of day-care structures and of jobs that can realistically be combined with family duties. This last point, raised again and again by social workers, puts the norm of internality into question.

In fact, activation is implemented by social workers in very different ways depending on the gender of clients (Modak, Messant, & Keller, 2013) and the presence of children: mothers to be integrated into the labour market are viewed as a group to be convinced – but only in due time – of the necessity of work/family conciliation (a term never used in the case of fathers); paradoxically, state policies concerning childcare and the job market are seen as having to make this possible. The main problem social workers encounter when activating clients who are mothers is thus not only to get them to adopt this latter norm, a move which is consistent with the norm of internality, but to find childcare solutions and mother-friendly jobs. Activation work thus takes on a clearly gendered character, giving a concrete nature to deeply gendered norms at the heart of social policies (Tabin & Enescu, 2012; Daly & Rake, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Morel, 2007); this differentiated attitude in terms of gender also explains why it is carried out with a high degree of

professional circumspection. This restrained attitude comes through in the following quotation:

> She did not come to either the interview we had set up beforehand, nor to the last class, nor to her appointment with the social worker. […] On the one hand I'm angry at her, […] but then on the other hand, […] it really is an awful situation, truly awful, and as time goes on she is sinking deeper and deeper. (Annie, employed in a social integration programme for mothers)

As we can see, social workers intervene in a stricter manner with 'young adults experiencing difficulties' than with families with children under 16: the age of the young clients (18–25) presumably justifies interventions that are very rarely used with other age groups (whether in terms of specific rules set by social workers, or in terms of sanctions imposed); this is in keeping with the findings of other studies that have shown that the age of clients induces social relationships resulting in differences in how they are treated (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006).

Conclusion

Our analysis of the social workers' discourse shows the ways in which they do (re) define active social policies while implementing them. The temporality of activation they describe is indicative of their perception that it belongs to a more or less distant future; it reveals not only that lines drawn between clients are blurred, but also that social work interventions take on a far less activation-focused form in practice than would be surmised from an analysis solely based on legal provisions. The time frame chosen by social workers for implementing activation measures is not founded upon the letter of legal texts and directives: researchers who described the turn towards activation as generalised have missed facts that lead us to reconsider the impact of activation policies. In others words, activation policies are not translated into action with all beneficiaries.

Moreover, activation – even when seen as appropriate by social workers – is not viewed by them in the same way for all groups of clients. As a result, the actual meaning of the word activation varies – another fact scholars who focused solely on formal/legal activation policies were not in a position to observe. Our interviewees viewed a process resulting in clients willingly accepting a realistic activation project as legitimate and useful for beneficiaries aged 18–25. Yet the 'realistic' character of the project puts into question, at least to some extent, the norm of internality central to activation policies; it also confirms the lack of homogeneity of this norm (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988). As far as families with children under 16 are concerned, gendered activation norms prevail; moreover, measures are implemented in an extremely prudent manner because, for social workers, the mother's place is as much at home with her children as out to work. Moreover, for this group, the norm of internality takes on a paradoxical character because social work professionals are aware that clients cannot find childcare, or get a job that is compatible with the work they carry out at home for their families. As social workers say, activation in these cases is a policy steeped in paradox.

Active social policies are thus not always active. Activation takes on different meanings when professionals are dealing with young people or with mothers; doubt is cast by them on the norm of internality, though it is constitutive of active social

policies, because of labour market requirements. Finally, the results of our study demonstrate that social work research is crucial for a better understanding of issues of implementation in the field of social policies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. http://tamsys.sourceforge.net (all websites accessed 19 August 2014).
2. Source: Canton of Vaud (2003, May). Exposé des motifs et projet de loi sur l'action sociale vaudoise [memorandum and draft legislation on welfare], p. 24.
3. Source: website of canton of Vaud www.vd.ch.
4. If they are unwilling to cooperate, their benefits can be reduced for a limited period.
5. http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work.
6. No statistical data about sanctions is available.
7. In 2014, a new activation programme was enacted by canton of Vaud for people aged 26–40. This programme was not implemented at the time of our interviews with professionals.
8. A 25% reduction of benefits is the maximum penalty.

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