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Reflection on action by activation workers as professional learning strategy

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ABSTRACT

In this article, social work theory on reflective practice is used to explore the potential value of reflection on action for professional learning by activation workers who support people receiving welfare benefits to find work. The article focuses on the role of reflection on action in professional learning concerning three challenges which activation workers face: dealing with normative dilemmas, translating formal and informal knowledge into decision-making and dealing with power relations. The article presents tentative findings stemming from qualitative research on Dutch activation workers participating in reflection on action. Participants report multiple learning outcomes concerning these challenges. The theoretical and empirical exploration suggests that reflection on action can support learning by activation workers to better deal with professional challenges inherent to their work. However, these empirical findings are preliminary and based on a specific context. Further exploration by both scholars and practitioners is therefore suggested, in which the social work profession has a lot to offer.

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Introduction

Job activation of unemployed citizens in European welfare states usually combines coercive elements with services focused on developing skills and human capital (van Berkel, Larsen, and Caswell 2018). Scholars have described the demands this puts on the workers who deliver personalized activation services as being both vague and often conflicting (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Hagelund 2016; Kampen and Tonkens 2018). Like other street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) they are expected to meet these demands in an effective, fair, efficient and responsive way (Zacka 2017). Extant research shows that activation workers face at least three interrelated professional challenges which complicate their ability to meet these expectations.

Their first challenge concerns how to deal with the normative dilemmas resulting from potentially conflicting professional, organizational, client and activation policy norms on how to deliver activation services (Hansen and Natland 2017; Kjørstad 2005; Nielsen and Monrad 2023; Nothdurfter 2016; Raeymaeckers and Dierckx 2012). These studies show, for example, that activation policy goals focusing on work first in any job may be at odds with a client perspective on decent work, that caseloads can be too high to adhere to norms concerning the personal attention that clients require or that SLB organizations may demand sanctioning which conflicts with professional norms on how to support clients. Workers have to balance these conflicting norms when making decisions during service delivery.

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The second challenge is how to translate ambiguous knowledge about ‘effective’ activation into practice (Andreassen and Natland 2020; van Berkel and van der Aa 2013). This knowledge is both formal (from books, guidelines, ‘big data’, etc.) in nature as well as practical or ‘tacit’, which professionals acquire through working experience. The increasing popularity of ‘evidence-based practice’ as governing mechanism for various professional fields including activation work has contributed to the rise of this challenge. Available formal, scientific knowledge about activation is quite ambiguous and may be at odds with practical knowledge (Dall and Danneris 2019). Professionals therefore need to be able to weigh which formal and practical knowledge is most relevant to the situation at hand.

Thirdly, like other SLBs, activation workers have to deal with power relations that structure their activation working practice. Van Berkel and Borghi (2008) stress that the governance context, the organizational and occupational context together form a configuration that complicates shaping the ‘delicate equilibrium’ that frontline workers should aim for (Zacka 2017). Moreover, power relations play a role due to the conditionality built into social security arrangements (Andreassen and Natland 2020; van Berkel and van der Aa 2013). Workers deal with these power relations through their decision-making, resisting or reproducing them during their encounters.

Given the personalized nature of activation services, workers mostly deal with these challenges during interactions at the individual client level. In practice, activation workers have been seen to do this in diverse ways. Eikenaar et al. (2016), for example, show that frontline activation workers tend to deal with these challenges by using various frames of reference. Solvang (2017) shows that both individual worker preferences as well as contradictory organizational and policy imperatives partially explain this variety. Such variety may endanger fairness, effectiveness and responsiveness of resulting services.

Enhancing professionalization and professional learning of activation workers as a possible strategy to enable workers to deal with these challenges has been suggested by various authors (Andreassen and Natland 2020; Hagelund 2016; Kjørstad 2005; Sadeghi and Fekjær 2018; Sadeghi and Terum 2022; van Berkel et al. 2017; van Berkel, van der Aa, and van Gestel 2010). These authors suggest that given the fact that workers are required to individually weigh complex, diverse and value laden situations to find individualized activation ‘solutions’, activation work requires a professional logic, based on professional norms, skills and knowledge rather than following standardized activation policy rules and regulations.

In this article, we aim to add to this debate by exploring the value of a specific approach to professional learning by activation workers: reflection on action. Reflection on action is a ‘signature’ social work way of professional learning by stimulating a conscious dialogue between thinking and practice. Karvinen-Niinikoski (2009), for example, argues that reflection can help social workers to deal with change and might stimulate critical agency. Reflection on action may be a fruitful way to support workers in dealing with activation challenges, given the way in which reflection on action intends to stimulate critical and conscious professional deliberation. Until now reflection on action in activation has received little scholarly attention. Caswell and Dall (2022) are notable exceptions by exploring the value of conversation analysis as an approach to reflective practice.

The goal of this article is therefore to explore the potential value of reflection on action as professional learning strategy for activation workers to deal with normative tensions, to translate formal and practical knowledge into practice and to deal with power relations.

We do this by first theoretically exploring the value of reflection on action for activation workers to learn how to deal with challenges in activation work. We then use secondary analysis of qualitative data on learning outcomes perceived by Dutch activation workers participating in a specific approach to reflection on action. Based on this exploration we will then argue that reflection on action indeed has potential value as a professional learning strategy for activation workers. However, this strategy needs further development and testing in various activation contexts. The social work profession may play an active role in this development.

Professional learning through reflection on action

In many professions reflective practice is considered to contribute to professional learning (Ruch and Lees 2022; Williams and Jennings 2022). One of the most prominent scholars on reflection as professional learning, Schön, perceives reflection in professional contexts as a dialogue between practice and thinking, a dialogue which he defines as reflective practice. According to him, the intended general learning outcome of this dialogue is an increased ability to deal with the inherent complexity and ambiguity of professional decisions given the world in which professionals operate (Schön 1983). Schön challenges a technical and rational approach to professional learning, stressing that the social world demands more than a straightforward process of putting learned theory and procedures into practice. It requires the ability to translate knowledge into action in often complex and ambiguous situations (Ken 2019). Reflective practice may take place during professional practice (reflection in action), as well as ex-post (reflection on action). This paper focuses on reflection on action.

Schön distinguishes between formal knowledge and practical ('tacit') knowledge. Reflection on formal knowledge can result in learning outcomes concerning the translation into professional practice of general, abstract theories used by the profession. If reflection takes place without questioning underlying goals and interpretations, Ruch (2000) speaks of technical reflective practice, in which the focus lies on solving a professional problem in terms of undisputed goals such as effectiveness and efficiency.

Schön as well as more recent scholars like Williams and Jennings (2022) and Smith (2022), consider reflection on tacit knowledge to be equally important as reflection on formal knowledge. According to them, professional practical experience embodies relevant knowledge to learn from, even though it is often hard for professionals to make this knowledge explicit. By revealing practical wisdom through reflection on practice, it can add to formal knowledge. At the same time, reflecting on tacit knowledge is important because when it remains unexamined, it may also lead to undesired outcomes, including stereotyping and ineffective decisions. Schön describes reflecting as a way to correct this process of over-learning (Schön 1983). Learning outcomes from reflecting on tacit knowledge thus may consist of broadening professional perspectives on clients and professional action or enriching formal knowledge.

While Schön focuses predominantly on the subjective interpretations of the individual professional, social work literature on reflective practice, especially on critical reflection, stresses that the self of the professional and what is perceived as valuable knowledge have to be considered as being part of social structures of power. These structures are constructed between people inside and around organizations, in which multiple perspectives and sources of knowledge and truths exist but only few are dominant, often reducing complexity and multiple identities to categories. This limits alternative ways of practice. Fook and Gardner (2007) therefore suggest to include a critical stance in reflection in the context of social work aimed at learning outcomes, including the ability to deconstruct one's own perspective, and insight in the way power structures are constructed in interaction. The term *reflexivity* is often used to refer to the fact that what knowledge is found and labelled to be relevant is everything but objective. Self-awareness of biases therefore is important for accountable decision-making.

Reflective practice is described by Fergusson et al. (2019) as both a skill that can be developed as well as a method of intentionally creating learning situations in which this process of reflection can occur. In practice, reflection on action can be stimulated in various ways: individually or collectively, formally and informally. More formal forms may bring focus and critical perspectives to reflection (Marshall et al. 2022). Zacka (2017) warns that informal reflection usually is practiced with like-minded colleagues while especially the confrontation with other-minded colleagues is important. In the context of activation work, Eikenaar et al. (2016) likewise argue for collectively organized reflective meetings using differences between colleagues to stimulate reflective practice.

Reflection on action can thus be considered as an effort to learn from professional experience by intentionally questioning assumptions and interpretations, the formal and practical knowledge involved as well as the reproduction and construction of power structures. Reflection on action can open up perspectives on alternative practices in order to be able to work in a constantly changing and complex reality.

Fook and Gardner (2007) report several potential outcomes of practicing critical reflection. Possible learning outcomes include, for example, an increased self-awareness through evaluation, an increased awareness of connectedness with colleagues; a broader understanding of theory; a greater tolerance of ambiguity and the multitude of perspectives and finally, an increased sense of responsibility and feeling of personal agency.

In the domain of activation work, to the best of our knowledge reflection on action has hardly received scholarly attention. Caswell and Dall (2022) do show the potential value of reflective practice by presenting an approach to reflective practice consisting of discussions between researchers and workers on recorded conversations between workers and clients. They find increased worker awareness of routines which in turn provides a starting point for further reflection on these routines.

We therefore think it is relevant to further explore whether reflection on action may support professional learning by activation workers to deal with normative tensions, to translate formal and practical knowledge into practice and to deal with power. Reflection on action may stimulate the exploration of the normative ambiguities in activation work as it offers a method to explore personal and organizational assumptions and biases and invites multiple perspectives on specific experiences. It may encourage the exploration of both practical and formal knowledge in relation to the situation at hand. In the context of activation work where ambiguous norms of effective strategies to activate clients exist, it can offer a basis to integrate theory and practice. Finally, reflection on action might be a helpful way of enabling activation workers to deal more consciously with their position of power related to working in a bureaucratic organization with both coercive as well as service oriented elements.

Methodology

Through action research (AR) the authors of this paper are involved in the ongoing, step-wise development and evaluation of a method for reflection on action by activation workers in a large Dutch municipality. Between 2019 and 2023 a first AR-cycle was completed in which a method for reflection on action was developed, tested and evaluated together with practitioners. In 2023 a second AR-cycle of further development of the method has started. This paper uses preliminary insights into the value of reflection on action emanating from the first AR-cycle.

The AR is part of a broader project which started in 2019 and aims at improving municipal activation services for social assistance recipients. Dutch social assistance ('Participation Act') is the last resort, means-tested national public minimum income provision. Social assistance recipients are obliged to actively look for jobs, to accept guidance by street-level workers and to participate in activation programmes. Non-compliance is sanctionable. Design and delivery of activation services is a decentralized, municipal responsibility. The improvement project aims to increase labour market participation of social assistance recipients, by lowering caseloads, stimulating interprofessional cooperation, organizing integrated care, intensifying client monitoring and by developing a professionalization programme for municipal activation workers.

The authors are part of a research team responsible for the evaluation of the improvement project as well as for the development of the professionalization programme. The method for reflection on action which we discuss in this paper is part of the professionalization programme. The idea to develop a method for reflection on action came up during discussions on professionalization between the authors and municipal managers in 2019. For most workers this would provide the first opportunity to experience reflection on action. In the Dutch context

job activation is not considered to be a social work discipline. Contrary to some of the Nordic countries, Dutch social work does not have a legally established jurisdiction concerning activation work. Workers have mixed professional backgrounds, such as personnel studies, legal-administrative studies and, indeed, social work. As such, the AR can be understood as the introduction of a social work practice into an organization which does not have a social work signature.

The development of the method takes place through AR consistent with action research as presented by Altrichter et al. (2002). The AR started in 2019 and continues until 2025. The goal is to develop a method for reflection on action which fits the needs, dilemmas and specific working context of activation workers. The AR consists of a cyclical process in which activation workers work on learning to reflect on their practice, with the underlying aim to improve their activation practice and to share their findings with colleagues and managers. Secondly, participants contribute to the development of the reflection method. They do so by pointing out what aspects of the method under development they experience as valuable to their learning process and by formulating personal learning outcomes. Moreover, various participants have co-designed the agenda for meetings and co-hosted sessions for colleagues. Participants increasingly share how they experience the value of this method with colleagues who don't participate in the meetings as well as with their managers.

The action research process itself falls outside the scope of this paper. Rather, we focus on the insights which the first AR-cycle provides into the potential value of reflection on action for activation workers to learn about dealing with challenges they are confronted with concerning multiple norms, ambiguous knowledge and power relations.

The approach for reflection on action as it has been developed during the first AR-cycle, consists of series of three to four two-hour meetings in which five to eight activation workers participate. Two follow-up series were realized for participants that wanted to continue to work on their reflective skills. The meetings were supervised by one of the researchers. The participants have been recruited through short presentations in regular team meetings, through invitation via team managers and through an informative flyer which is distributed online among teams of activation workers. Most participants have attended a complete series of four sessions. The objective is to work with a stable group, but in practice group composition has changed slightly throughout the series. Twenty-four participants have participated in one or two follow-up series of sessions after the first series. Due to COVID-19 several meetings were held online. Until winter 2022, 40 sessions covering various series were realized, in which 65 unique activation workers participated in at least one session.

The main characteristics of the approach developed to stimulate reflection on action can be described in terms of *thematic building blocks* and *didactical choices*.

Thematic building blocks are exemplary, generic themes that have proven to repeatedly raise issues in activation practice. They provided the 'content' on which the reflection on action focuses. They were meant to be recognizable by workers as posing challenges in daily work. They were related to the main challenges we identified earlier, but not the same. The themes were defined based on insights from literature as well as from secondary analysis of available interviews with workers and managers from the broader evaluation of the improvement project, concerning main issues in daily work. The choice of themes was fine tuned through trial and evaluation with participants. Four building blocks were defined, which are summarized in Table 1.

Furthermore, four didactical choices were made to stimulate reflection.

The first choice was to create diverse groups in terms of professional roles concerning activation work. Zacka (2017) as well as Eikenaar et al. (2016) argue in favour of sessions that bring together other-minded colleagues. This would invite participants to explore the variety of (normative) interpretations, offering the conditions to learn about their own bias, values and motives in interpreting situations. To enhance the capacity of participants to deal with plurality of norms and perspectives, dialogue was stimulated and modelled to constructively reveal and use multiple perspectives on the issue at stake through careful listening and questioning (Williams and Jennings 2022).

Table 1. Thematic building blocks.

Thematic building block	Explanation
Professional activation work in an ambiguous context	Relates to professional agency in the context of different and potentially conflicting meanings, values and interests in relation to activation services
Strengthening motivation of clients and employers in activation work	Relates to how to motivate clients and employers, dealing with different goals that are perceived as valuable, with ambiguous knowledge and with the often multi-problem situations of clients that interact with the nature of their motivation.
Interprofessional cooperation in activation work	Relates to structuring interprofessional cooperation to support clients against the background of partially varying professional goals and organizational embeddedness
Power and dependency in activation work	Concerns challenges of power and dependency regarding the relation between the client and the activation worker as well as between the activation worker and the organization.

The second didactical choice was to use elements of ‘appreciative inquiry’ (AI) as a dialogic approach to engage in reflection. AI has been evaluated as an effective way of learning in organizations by exploring what people find important, what connects them and how desired change can be shaped (Bertram, Culver, and Gilbert 2016; Masselink et al. 2020). AI can contribute to creating a safe, supportive and blame-free environment for reflection (Marshall et al. 2022). Elements that were used in reflective sessions included, for example, reflecting on personal success experiences in activation work, uncovering what was considered as valuable in practice, underlying professional values, personal talents and effective strategies. AI was also used to get acquainted with the peers in a new group, uncovering common values despite different perspectives. Furthermore, AI served to explore desirable future practice and to articulate necessary actions in the present to move towards this goal.

The ‘working material’ for reflective practice consists of the personal professional practice of participants. Therefore, the third didactical choice was to explore personal experiences of participants in relation to the central theme. Exploring experiences was done using exercises based on reflective models such as Gibbs (1988). Using both structure and modelling (Williams and Jennings 2022), participants were invited to refrain from reacting with quick solutions for the experiences their co-workers shared, but rather to explore what the professional saw, did, felt and knew in relation to the client and the organizational context; what appeared to ‘work’ and how this could lead to learning outcomes for future practice. This didactical choice was especially relevant given a working context of scarcity of means and time and political pressure to quickly deliver results, which may incite workers to make interpretations of complex situations too quickly (Eikenaar, Rijk, and Meershoek 2016).

The fourth didactical choice was to provide short (twelve minutes) knowledge video clips on the thematic building blocks, aimed at sharing existing scientific theory and views on the topic. These clips were sent to participants before every session with the invitation to use the insights and perspectives to reflect on their personal professional experiences. These knowledge clips were not meant to be ‘instructive’, but rather to invite an open dialogue between the ‘formal’ knowledge and the practical knowledge of these professionals in relation to specific experiences.

Data

To empirically explore the value of this approach to reflection on action we have done a secondary analysis on three sources of qualitative data resulting from the first AR-cycle. All participants agreed to the use of these data for research and development. Additional approval of an ethic board was not required.

First, five individual evaluative interviews by phone took place after the series of sessions before July 2020. After July 2020, two additional individual interviews were conducted specifically to reach participants that could not attend group evaluations.

Second, seven collective evaluation meetings took place after each series of sessions that started after July 2020. During these meetings participants were asked whether they had learned something from participating in the reflective practice-programme and to formulate learning outcomes in their own wordings. The researcher wrote reports of these meetings which were cross-checked with participants.

Twenty-three workers participated at least once in a collective evaluative meeting or in an individual interview. Besides absence due to COVID-19 in the first series, non-participation depended primarily on availability, which means we have no reason to expect non-participation has influenced our insights into the value of reflection.

Third, we have done secondary analysis of 180 pages of field notes made by the researcher during and right after sessions of the reflection programme. For this paper, fieldnotes were analysed to gather evaluative notes of participants about learning outcomes during and right after sessions. Also fieldnotes are used to provide these outcomes with some context, giving an impression on how participants worked towards their learning outcomes during sessions.

Thematic coding was applied to analyse these data, with the three challenges of activation work and related learning outcomes as themes (Gibbs 2007). Additional outcomes were found, such as an increased willingness to cooperate with colleagues, but fall out of the scope of this paper.

Where citations are included in this article, a code is used to protect the privacy of respondents. The code WORK (referring to activation worker) is used, followed by a number that refers to a specific participant. Where fieldnotes are included in this report, this is described as 'F' followed by the date the fieldnote was taken for example, F20220603. For the scenes presented in this article, fieldnotes were edited in order to increase the conciseness and readability of these scenes. Participants gave their consent to use the data collected during and after series of sessions, with protection of their privacy.

Our approach has several limitations.

An important limitation of this approach concerns the bias resulting from our combined roles as developers, facilitators and evaluators as well the choice to focus on learning outcomes concerning the challenges. We have tried to minimize the impact of this bias by cross validating our observations and evaluations with the workers participating in the programme.

Second, another source of bias results from the fact that our evaluation rests on self-reported learning outcomes, including self-reports on actual changes in practice because of participating in the programme. Such self-reports run the risk of being overly positive or overestimate actual changes in practice. Still, they are indicative of workers' own perceptions of the value of reflection on action.

Thirdly, as action research often does, the results should be considered mostly valuable in their context. For example, we have developed our approach to reflection for workers with little or no experience with reflective practice. For workers that are more experienced in reflective practice, other types of approaches may be more fitting. Furthermore, the method for reflection is still under development in close cooperation with activation workers. As such, we have not studied a fleshed out, definitive method to stimulate reflection.

Given these limitations, this study cannot be considered – and is not intended to be – a formal assessment of the learning impact of reflection on action. We do think the study does serve this paper's objective, which is to empirically explore the potential relevance of reflection on action for activation workers to deal with some of the challenges their work poses to them.

Learning outcomes of reflection on action

Dealing with normative tensions

Activation workers are confronted with dilemmas in which they have to deal with different, possibly conflicting norms on how to deliver activation services. Reflection on action may help workers

become more conscious of these dilemmas and to collectively explore solutions. Our data provide examples of how this type of learning may occur.

Comparable to findings by Caswell and Dall (2022) we find that most respondents felt that the sessions led to a greater awareness of the different and sometimes conflicting norms in activation work, as a result of the confrontation with colleagues with other views and due to working with the formal knowledge presented in knowledge clips.

During a reflective session, discussing the knowledge video on Zacka's moral dispositions (Zacka 2017), participants position themselves in a triangle of dispositions between the dispositions indifferent, caregiver or enforcer. Participants position themselves based on self-judgement. We reflect on the value and pitfall of every disposition and the differences between participants. WORK10 responds from his caregiver position and explains that the value of this position for him is that it helps him to be sensitive to the perspective of the client. However, he also feels a conflict with the norm of efficiency in the organization as he sees that he often takes a lot of time when acting from this position. Later on in the session, reflecting with others on a specific work situation, we explore what another moral disposition could mean for him, in this case the enforcer and the indifferent. Reflecting on this experience, he concludes that from a caregiver's perspective he tends to focus more on the client's perspective and formulated needs and less on obligations to find work. In cases where his client is less enthusiastic about work, he finds that the other dispositions stimulate him to use more clarifying questions that could help him to explore possibilities to activate his client (F20221108).

Respondents, for example, mentioned that reflection on action helped them to become more aware of the inherent normative ambiguities of activation work as an aspect of complexity of their profession rather than as a personal challenge. Several observed to have learned that they are not alone in their daily struggles in activation work.

Additionally, respondents observed that by reflecting on the different norms and demands, they developed new ideas about how to deal with those conflicting norms and demands for example, dealing with colleagues from different departments having different norms.

In a session about professional cooperation, participants discuss the different norms regarding activation work and different perspectives on client's ability to work. One difficulty participants experience is that they find that in some departments working closely with employers (called job hunters), colleagues are too strict in selecting 'fitting' candidates for employers. Participants are invited to reflect on a success experience as learning material. WORK9 then tells us how a client, lacking accurate language skills and being older, has been categorized by colleagues as difficult to coach to work. WORK9 sees more potential and, cooperating with a job hunter, succeeds in finding her client a job in which the client results to be happy and successful. What a success, everybody responds. The facilitator stops the conversation and points to the fact that participants actually did not hear much about the practice of WORK9 and invites participants to explore success factors in the practice of WORK9. Now participants start to discover how WORK9 worked constructively with the different norms on the 'right' client for the job. For example, she invested in uncovering the norms and values of the job hunter, and tells how she makes use of her insight in her client's background to offer a broader perspective on her abilities to work. WORK4 states: 'this gets me thinking about how we refer our clients to the work department. Sometimes we just don't check what happens after referral. She explains to be inspired by this way of really investing in cooperation, instead of complaining about different perspectives. WORK9 mentions that she learns from this that it is investing in the relationship with the client that offered her the chance to really convince colleagues and cooperate effectively on activation. She intends to put this into practice the upcoming week (F20220512).

Furthermore, almost all respondents mentioned that the confrontation with other-minded colleagues through dialogic methods, led to an awareness of their own norms, values and assumptions about clients:

'By meeting with colleagues from different departments and by watching the knowledge clips in which frames of reference were discussed, I started to wonder 'what is my frame of reference?' one participant remarks. She continues by describing how she learned that, although their clients are very similar to hers, her colleagues from a different department are much more focused on quick re-insertion into work, while she focuses more on aspects like well-being and responsiveness (F20220621).

Translating ambiguous formal and practical knowledge into practice

Exploring and considering ambiguous formal and practical, tacit knowledge on how to activate clients is another exemplary challenge for activation workers. Both formal and practical knowledge were discussed during the reflection sessions in relation to practice.

In relation to the use of formal knowledge, respondents thought that the introduction of formal knowledge (through knowledge video clips and exercises) clarified their professional struggles:

[the knowledge clips] provide me with a theoretical framework to understand my daily struggles: how do I start this conversation? How to approach this client? Do I talk about it again or do I choose a more coercive strategy? This is my daily struggle and I'm struggling alone usually! (WORK2).

Similarly, several respondents mentioned that the theory provided them with the words to recognize the complexity and to work with that complexity more consciously in their daily practice. Generally, respondents mentioned that the themes and formal knowledge offered them a new perspective on their daily practice, opening up insights into alternative action.

WORK5 reflects in a session on motivating clients on a situation in which she has a hard time activating her client, who wants to spend every minute with her daughter, and therefore is perceived as hard to activate by WORK5. She tells us that she is proud of getting this client a voucher for education but doesn't know how to continue. We use the 'integrative behaviour model' which is often used in Dutch activation work as input to explore the view of WORK5 on the barriers for this client to work and on suitable interventions. After this exploration, WORK5 mentions that using this model, makes clear to her that she might have jumped to solutions too quickly, as she does more often she realises. She adds that it is valuable for her to realise that using such a model and reflecting with others can help her not to fall into her tendency to jump to conclusions and make a more clear analysis of why a client is not moving to work, exploring motives, abilities and norms in a structured way. She intends to clarify the situation with her client using the integrative behaviour model. The organisational pressure to quickly come to results, reinforces her tendency to jump to solutions, she explains. Later on, she tells us that by discussing these insights with her team manager, she feels strengthened to explore the situation of the client more completely and to take more deliberate actions in activation. (F20210712)

Several respondents mentioned that reflecting on practical and formal knowledge contributed to feeling better enabled to substantiate their professional decisions. Some of them also indicated that reflecting on knowledge stimulated them to take more time before and during conversations with clients, to think their actions through.

An important limitation concerning this challenge proved to be the fact that workers had little actual mastery over formal knowledge concerning activation. Respondents were not used to routinely getting up to date with state-of-the-art scientific knowledge. The reflection sessions themselves appeared to be their most important source for new research insights.

Reflecting on the formal knowledge therefore seldom brought up formal knowledge other than the insights which were introduced in the knowledge clips. Respondents acknowledged this during evaluation:

I feel shocked to realise that we actually make so little use of formal knowledge in our practice. (WORK9)

At times I really feel like running around as a headless chicken. More use of formal knowledge would help to improve our results. (WORK3)

Dealing with power relations

Activation workers are state agents, embedded in relations of power with their clients and within their organizations. The ability to sanction clients is the most evident manifestation of this power, but power also consists of epistemic power, the ability to assess and categorize client situations, as well as the ability to decide about activation goals and trajectories.

According to respondents, reflection on action contributed to greater awareness of power relations as well as to the ability to wield power more consciously.

WORK6 tells us during a session on power relations (thematical building block) how she tries to eliminate her power in conversations with clients. ‘clients start from an already disadvantageous position because of the letters they receive from us and it’s up to me to get rid of this. I try to do so by focusing on the relationship and the person. For example, I ask them “tell me about you”. You have to get rid of the preconception of the client concerning our power’. WORK7 responds: ‘but is this in fact a preconception? Because isn’t it just an objective fact that we do represent this power?’ In the conversation that follows participants reflect on how they deal with this power. Some focus on the personal level and relations to balance or cover up the power, others offer explicit clarity on expectations on both sides. Several participants note that even if you do not want to express power, the client might still see you and the organisation as very powerful. At the end of the session WORK6 formulates her learning outcome: she tells us that she now sees that she tends to avoid the power coming from her position but, because she now sees that it is present in the interaction anyway, she wants to handle this power with more transparency and clarity for herself and her client. (F20220604)

Several respondents mentioned that they had become more aware of the fact that from a clients’ perspective they represent a powerful public, municipal agency, even if the professional does not want to express power. Several participants become aware of their tendency to ignore or cover up their position of power in interaction with clients. Participants mention in evaluations to feel more enabled to deal with this position of power in a more transparent and constructive way to clients.

Respondents also exchanged ways of how they experienced the power of their organization over them as professionals and ways of dealing with this for example, regarding target-steering. Respondents report increased awareness of these power relations and their own strategies of dealing with these relations.

This -the reflective sessions- provided a free space to explore what we struggle with. Both at the level of specific cases as well as the organisational context. (WORK1)

I learned from how others deal with these complexities. (WORK3)

Conclusion

Activation work poses challenges to workers related to conflicting norms concerning activation, integrating ambiguous formal and informal knowledge and dealing with power relations. Reflective practice may support learning of workers on how to confront these challenges. As such, it may be a fruitful part of a broader strategy to professionalize activation work. However, in the domain of activation work the potential value of reflective practice has hardly been studied. As such, its actual potential is unclear. In this paper, we have therefore explored the potential value of organized, collective reflection on action by activation workers for professional learning concerning these challenges.

Various approaches to reflective practice are well known from general social work literature. In the field of activation the only specific approach that has received scholarly attention concerns the use of conversational analysis (Caswell and Dall 2022). In this paper we have added to this small body of knowledge by scrutinizing self-reported learning outcomes by activation workers participating in another approach to reflection on action, which is being developed through action research. In this approach, reflection on action is stimulated during organized and supervised encounters between workers, structured by thematic and didactical building blocks. Our study concerns a context in which activation workers are not trained in reflective practice and often lack experience with reflection.

Our exploration suggests that in this specific context, collective reflection on action may indeed have value for professional learning concerning these challenges, in at least three ways.

First of all, comparable to findings by Caswell and Dall (2022) and consistent with Fook and Gardner (2007) we find that reflection on action may stimulate professional learning through increasing professional awareness of the challenges. Our exploration suggests that awareness may be raised by collectively naming these challenges, by scrutinizing specific professional experiences related to these challenges and by being confronted with contrasting perspectives on these challenges, grounded in both formal as well as informal knowledge.

Second, our data indicate how this approach to reflection on action may also increase awareness of alternative ways of dealing with these challenges. As such, it potentially increases professional repertoire, even though increased awareness of course is not a sufficient condition for actual changes of professional practice. Nevertheless, some respondents did provide examples of how they had developed new ways of acting.

Third, self-perceived learning outcomes related to the ability to be better able to substantiate and explain professional decisions, which can be considered important in a field where ambiguity and conflicting expectations are part and parcel of daily activation practice.

This assertion is based on a specific, collective and supervised approach to reflection on action under development, within the context of an ongoing action research project. This specific context evidently does not allow for conclusive statements about the general usefulness of reflection on action by activation workers. We do feel that our preliminary findings challenge both scholars as well as practitioners to further explore reflection on action as part of ongoing professionalization of activation workers.

Several issues untouched by this paper deserve attention in this exploration.

First, we would applaud comparative research on different approaches to reflection in diverse activation contexts. Comparative research could, for example, clarify how, under which conditions and for which types of workers reflection does contribute to professional learning.

Second, developing valuable approaches to reflection in activation work requires attention for the embedding of reflection programmes within broader (organizational) professionalization strategies. A key issue here is under which conditions reflective practice contributes to actual professional activation practice, which is better able to deal with the challenges posed to workers. This is especially relevant for activation contexts where engaging in reflection is a new form of professional learning and not part of the organizational culture. If SLB-literature has taught us anything, it is that actions of workers – including participation in professionalization activities – are structured by possibilities and limitations which the broader organization context provides. The recent work of Fook (2022) who explores how reflective practice can be embedded within social work organizations, provides useful insights into this topic. Studying the role of frontline managers is also relevant, given the fact that managerial practices structure both activation practices as well as room for professionalization (van Berkel, Penning de Vries, and Knies 2021).

Third, the development of reflection methods fitting various activation contexts deserve further scrutiny by practice oriented researchers. For example, the method described in this paper may be enhanced by incorporating the perspectives of unemployed clients and employers into reflection on action, to balance potential professional biases concerning clients and the labour market. This is part of the second research cycle of the action research, the follow-up of the AR-cycle on which this paper is based.

To conclude, social work as a profession and as a research discipline has a lot to offer to this agenda. Even though reflective practice is not a 'solved and undisputed issue' in social work, the social work profession does have extensive experience with reflection on action and the challenges it poses. Established social work insights in promise and pitfalls can therefore fruitfully inform development of reflection on action in the specific context of job activation. In contexts where social work is already substantially involved in activation work this will be easiest to achieve. In other contexts, it may provide the opportunity to re-enforce social work involvement in activation practice. Ultimately this may support citizens with a vulnerable position on the labour market to find better opportunities for participating in the labour market.

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