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# The Welfare Subject in the “One-stop Shop”: Agency in Troublesome Welfare Encounters

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*The purpose of this article is to investigate the agency of “welfare subjects” in welfare encounters, situated in a “one-stop shop” reform context, thereby providing increased theoretical sensitivity into the field of welfare encounters’ research. Anchored in a Norwegian reform context, this article analyses agency related to welfare encounters, including welfare subjects’ attempts to hold NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration) accountable to help them. Shifting agency positions are located, the lines of responsibility in the welfare encounters are found to be unclear, and there are indications that this may contribute to the production of destructive agency positions.*

*Key words: activation, agency, one-stop shop reform, welfare encounters, welfare subject*

One-stop shop reforms have been implemented in a number of welfare states in recent years. Scholars of political and organizational science interpret such reforms in light of service integration and accountability aims (Askim, Fimreite, Moseley, & Pedersen, 2011; Byrkjeflot, Christensen, & Læg Reid, 2013; Christensen, Fimreite, & Læg Reid, 2013; Minas, 2014). Prior to and parallel to these reforms, a broad range of welfare states—liberal, conservative and social democratic—have reshaped their language, philosophy and organization along the lines of individual responsibility, activation and participation (Berkel & Borghi, 2007; Bonvin, 2008; Gubrium, Harsløf, & Lødemel, 2014; Handler 2004; Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Wright, 2012). As argued by several scholars, these two trends are inherently linked: While a

range of activation reforms in the 1990s were focused on changing policies and benefits, the 'second wave of activation reforms' represents a change in governance (cf. Lødemel & Moreira, 2014, pp. 1–2). The organizational reforms aim at putting the systems in better shape to deliver services. This is essential in order to succeed with neo-liberal activation policies promoting self-governance, motivation and individual responsibility.

For the individual engaging in the welfare encounter, the ability to take responsibility, and to hold the system to account, requires rational and reflexive agency. However, people are not necessarily in a rational and reflexive subject position at all times. A particular body of literature pinpoints the complexities of agency related to the welfare subject as being relational, dynamic, differentiated, interconnected, interdependent, intersubjective and interactive (Wright, 2012; see also Greener, 2002; Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004). This literature holds potential for a grounded analysis of agency in welfare encounters.

How service users targeted for activation measures are dealing with—or in—welfare encounters is a relevant aspect of social work and social policy. Situated in the context of the Norwegian NAV reform (labour and welfare reform), this paper analyzes agency positions in welfare encounters, related to encounters or sequences over some time that is attached with bureaucratic trouble or tardiness.<sup>1</sup> The empirical analysis focuses on coordination issues and accountability in NAV, from the standpoint of service users, and the production of situated agency in this setting. This article contributes to social work and policy research on welfare encounters by outlining the shifting positions of agency for people targeted to become activated, situated within specific bureaucratic contexts of a one-stop shop reform.

In what follows, I briefly present the context of the NAV reform in light of accountability and the "responsible citizens" discourse, and then outline a specific body of literature on agency which has been developed in the context of social policy and social work research. After presenting the study (including data and methods), the empirical analysis is presented in two parts and followed by a discussion of the themes explored.

## Reform Justification, Accountability and “Responsible Citizens”

The NAV reform was adopted by the Norwegian parliament in 2005, and implementation began one year later, followed by ambitious reform aims on behalf of the welfare subject and the Norwegian employment rate, as well as major organizational changes (Lundberg, 2012). The reform included a merger of the employment services and the social insurance administration, two central organizations in the Norwegian welfare state, and the coordination of the new state-level organization with the social services on the municipal level (Andreassen & Aars, 2015). In the political process that led to reform implementation, a specific problem representation was mobilized and gained dominance—that of the multiservice user, labelled the “shuttlecock” (*kasteball*) (Syltevik, 2013). The shuttlecock was a specific kind of welfare subject, who needed help from more than one of the former welfare organizations at the same time.

The three welfare organizations provided different “user logics” in the welfare encounter, and the image of the multi-service user being shuttled back and forth without getting the required help became a powerful image for poor coordination. The welfare services were portrayed as incapable of providing relevant help, resulting in passivity and dependency. The solution mobilized was organizational reform through a new one-stop shop in order to provide integrated, holistic and “seamless” service provision. The reform aimed to get people back to employment and to make the services more user-friendly, holistic and efficient (Christensen et al., 2013).

Organizational scholars evaluating one-stop shop reforms (e.g., Askim et al., 2011; Byrkjeflot et al., 2013) see them as approaches for coordinating services and improving accountability both vertically (upwards to central government and downwards to citizens) and horizontally (to partners). Accountability may be understood as a specific social relation: “a relationship between an actor and a forum in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences” (Bovens, 2007, p. 450). Sullivan (2003) states that the more contributors there are in public decision-making, the

more difficult it is to specify who is accountable. As Askim et al. (2011, p. 1454) point out in relation to one-stop shop reforms: “while creating opportunities for new forms of accountability, [they] also pose significant challenges in terms of knowing who to hold accountable for what.”

These points are actualized when observing the organization NAV. Behind the “shop,” there are a number of other units and bureaus taking part in the service production, including casework units, call centers, special units, and a number of private contractors providing job training, motivation, and educational programs. During the organizational reform process, it became increasingly clear to authorities, welfare professions, service users, and the general public that this new organizational structure may produce fragmentation and co-ordination problems of its own (Christensen et al., 2013; Ekspertgruppen, 2015; Lundberg, 2012).

The one-stop shops in the welfare sector are strongly related to the implementation of activation policies, and may be seen as a part of the second wave of activation reforms (Gubrium et al., 2014; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Minas, 2014). The reforms aim to activate people into employment, partly through a range of liberal power technologies (Barnes, 2009; Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2012). Indeed, through the discursive apparatus of neo-liberalism, social policy contexts and governance reforms have been increasingly formed by discourses such as “modernization,” “efficiency,” “empowerment,” and “individual responsibility.” The “responsible citizen” is increasingly expected to share responsibility for delivering public policy objectives by participating in the design, management, and governance of services (Barnes & Prior, 2009; Newman & Clarke, 2009a, 2009b; Patrick, 2014; Wright, 2012). These discourses influence public debates, policy making and social work practices in Norway and elsewhere (Jessen & Tufte, 2014; Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Kjørstad, 2005; Nilssen, 2014; Syltevik 2013).

As stated above, for individuals to be responsible actors—and to be able to hold the one-stop shop accountable—requires rational and reflexive agency. In this paper, welfare subjects’ agency positions are analyzed within the context of welfare encounters during a one-stop shop reform accompanied by strengthened activation policies. In this regard, the concept of agency must be revisited.

## Conceptualizing Agency

Agency is a highly contested concept within the social sciences. In the field of social welfare, many authoritative voices have put forward an understanding of agency that is more moralistic than analytical (for an overview, see Deacon & Mann 1999, p. 423). According to Barnes (2000), social theory has borrowed such concepts as agency and choice from everyday discourse, where actions are characterised as voluntary rather than caused. Agency is a concept commonly used to "characterize individuals as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of a degree of choice" (Lister, 2004, p. 125). As Lister (2004) points out, there is a fine line between acknowledging people's agency, including the capacity to make mistakes and bad decisions (as everyone does), and blaming them for their misfortune. In focusing on agency, there is also a risk of romanticizing and idealizing. Within the research literature, the models of agency applied can be very different. Deacon (2004) highlights three distinct agency models: (1) choice-making in a quasi-market (cf. Le Grand, 2003); (2) moral subjects acting as interdependent and relational beings (cf. Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004); and (3) choice-making relating to welfare dependency. For the purpose of this article, I am inspired by the related and overlapping agency typologies developed by Lister (2004) and Hoggett (2001), as these typologies are applicable to the context of welfare encounters, and their understanding of agency is carefully situated within structure.

Lister distinguishes between different types of agency, ranging from strategic to everyday agency and from personal to political/citizenship agency. She labels these different types of agency (relating to poverty) as "getting by," "getting (back) at," "getting out," and "getting organized." Hoggett distinguishes between different models of agency and warns about a "lop-sided model of agency which is insufficiently sensitive to the passionate, tragic and contradictory dimensions of human experience" (Hoggett, 2001, p. 37). People do not necessarily act rationally nor reflexively at all times. Inspired by Freud, Hoggett sees people's self as split in multiple fractions.

In practice, then, people may have multiple selves. He presents a quadrant of four agency models (within the discussion of welfare subjects), one of which is Giddens' (1984) reflexive and

successful actor (*reflexive subject*). Reflexivity, as Giddens sees it, is a positive capacity that provides constructive agency. However, people can be highly reflexive and yet still feel powerless about their situation (*reflexive objects*). Hoggett also problematizes reflexivity and speculates whether all agency is reflexive, or rather that much reflexivity actually happens post hoc, after one has acted (*non-reflexive subjects*). When people's confidence, respect or esteem is attacked, they do not necessarily resist. The experience of powerlessness, resulting from poverty, marginalization and domination of various sorts may lead to depression and aggression being turned towards oneself (*non-reflexive objects*).

Both Hoggett (2001) and Lister (2004) underline that their types and models of agency should be seen as continuums of situations or events rather than personal character traits. They also add a distinction between first-order and second-order agency. First-order agency refers to *playing* the system or making limited change for oneself; second-order agency refers to *changing* the system (including political agency). Hoggett encourages a focus on second-order agency in social policy studies, while Greener (2002, p. 703) encourages a focus on first-order agency (game playing within clear rules) in welfare encounters "in an attempt to achieve at least some level of greater transparency and accountability in the administration of benefits." In this article, I am concerned with individual/first-order agency. Nevertheless, agency should not then be seen as isolated from structure (Barnes, 2000). People act and make choices in various circumstances, and their actions may be grounded in a range of different identities, moral obligations, and moralities, and may also be constrained by external factors. It is therefore an important task for academics in the fields of welfare, social administration, and social work to produce "a more nuanced account of agency as situational and variable, produced and negotiated through contextualized interaction" (Wright, 2012, p. 313).

## The Research

The objective of the research project was to explore service users' experiences of their encounters (in a broad sense) with the new organization, NAV, during the reform process, thereby enabling an exploration of the reforming organization through these experiences. The research project aimed to cover insights

from service users who were in the center of NAVs mandate, which were targeted for activation measures and that the NAV reform was said to better address. Interviewees were recruited with assistance from two local NAV offices in two different municipalities which sent invitation letters to service users receiving rehabilitation allowances, sick leave benefits, and unemployment benefits, and from the NAV unit "Intro og kvalifisering" (see Lundberg 2012 for more details). I interviewed 29 people (22–66 years old) who were involved with NAV as service users and benefit recipients, and who had wide-ranging backgrounds with regard to former employment, as well as social and medical history. All interviewees had mixed experiences with NAV, and all interviewees had experiences that could be related to the reform process which was ongoing at the time of the interview. The majority of the interviewees were receiving vocational rehabilitation allowances at the time of the interview. This group turned out to be useful informants in the study because of the breadth and duration of their experiences with NAV, consisting of multiple encounters that highlighted the situated aspects of agency.

Memory might be biased, and interviewees' accounts may be self-protective or self-righteous to some degree. As Hoggett (2001) notes, much reflexivity may also happen post hoc. Individuals may or may not be able to reflect on their agency or the lack of such agency within specific contexts. These are valid points, but qualitative interviews are still often the most accessible way of exploring lived experience.

I began my empirical investigations by locating the problematic of the everyday world of the actors that I was interested in studying (Smith, 1987). This is a methodological and analytical choice that privileges the individual informant's point of view, and that affects my focus on the organization, which becomes more indistinct than, for instance, in mainstream organizational research analysis (see, e.g., Askim et al., 2011). By exploring the subjects' experiences and points of view, fragments of the NAV bureaucracy and how the individual has acted towards the system are visualised.

Interview transcriptions were analyzed in several stages. Anchored in thematic analysis, the study has resulted in publications on a number of subjects relating to welfare reform, individual–system relations, health/illness and work ethics and



stigmatization (see Lundberg, 2012). In this article, I particularly focus on agency in welfare encounters. I have therefore chosen examples from the data in which I find purposeful to illustrate the situatedness, complexity and contextuality of agency positions. To give insights to the multiple elements of shifting and situated agency when dealing with NAV, the illustrations in this article are chosen from the experiences of service users who all have experiences with former administrations (to varying degrees), have been employed for years prior to their need for services from NAV, and have faced multiple problems related to unemployment and illness.

### Navigating in a Fragmented System

The individual—NAV relationships are contextual and therefore variable, but NAV has certain ways of responding to the individual request that imply accountability issues. A general account that many of the interviewees in the study shared was the image of NAV as being a chaotic and fragmented organization that was challenging to navigate. Although this was a theme with variations and nuances, one common experience concerned the shifting of caseworkers. Jonas turned to NAV after a combination of unemployment and a broken arm. In the process of deciding an appropriate form of activation, he experienced five caseworker changes. For people on benefits linked to demands for activation, contact with caseworkers may be crucial. For Jonas, it was critical to have an available caseworker to hold to account at this time. Post hoc, he reflects on the responsibility relationship regarding caseworkers and the system:

The last one didn't have anything to apologise for because she didn't even know I'd been waiting. All the Post-its stuck on top of the other Post-its saying, 'Call him about a meeting', that's where the mistake was. (Jonas, 30s)

Jonas' experience indicates accountability issues linked to whom to hold accountable (Askim et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2003). However, the issue is more complex than the mere shifting of caseworkers at the local NAV offices. Most of the informants learned that their caseworkers were constrained by what happened at the regional casework units. This represented an

organizational change: In the former offices, the service users mostly dealt directly with the very same employees who processed their cases. Ideally, this new internal division of labour in the “seamless” NAV system should not be a concern for service users (Askim et al., 2011). However, for the individual dealing with several caseworkers at the local NAV office, as well as several units in the system, it is often hard to know whom to hold accountable for what.

The individual–system relationship cannot be evenly balanced. The individual welfare subject has more insights into his/her situation and needs than does the system, while the system has more insights into its resources and measures. In complex cases—which those involving activation often are—information becomes a critical resource for the individual service user. Hildegunn, a former teacher in her early 50s who suffered from serious illness, experienced the critical issue of poor information first hand. She was changing from sick-leave benefits to vocational rehabilitation, but her caseworker asked her to delay applying so that her health condition could be evaluated. Hildegunn was assured that she had time to wait, but when she finally applied, she got a letter from the NAV case-work unit informing her that the casework process would take three months:

When I received that letter, I just felt (...). I was just irate. First, it was just so disrespectful. I felt ... how could they do such a thing? I had done everything properly. So I called them—I was calm and explained the situation to them. They told me that, well, that’s the way it is, it will take approximately three months. I asked what I should do when the sick-leave benefits ran out, as I wouldn’t have a penny to live on. Nothing. Well, I could apply for social benefits, they said. Then, I got so angry. I had done everything properly in order to get what I was entitled to in time; this is not my fault, it’s their fault. (Hildegunn, early 50s)

Hildegunn felt that she was treated with courtesy in her encounter with NAV on the phone, even though the employee at the call center could not help her solve her problem. She was encouraged to send a “service complaint” to NAV, which she did, although 18 months later, she still had not received a response.

Furthermore, she was referred to a different part of the NAV system—the social services, for immediate help.

Hildegunn was not eager to apply for social benefits, which she felt carried stigma and humiliation. She felt a lack of options in the situation, which was ultimately solved by way of a private loan from a family member. This aspect of “everyday agency” represents relational and interconnected agency (Wright, 2012), a resource obviously not available for all service users in similar situations. Following Titterton (1992), Lister (2004, pp. 130–131) sees personal, social and material coping resources as an unequally distributed yet important aspect of “getting by.” By viewing Hildegunn’s activation of family resources in this light, one can grasp the aspect of agency in this situation, although she described herself as being powerless in the situation.

One aspect of agency in welfare encounters relates to social goodwill from employees (Dubois, 2010). The issue of social goodwill is interesting, as it may depend on specific individual relationships. It also shows the negotiated and interconnected dimension of agency between service users and case-workers (Barnes & Prior, 2009; Wright, 2012). Aslaug, who was in her 50s, experienced a high level of service provision in her encounter with NAV. She even obtained the direct phone number of her caseworker in the casework unit so that she would not have to phone the call center if she had problems filling out her forms. This is a service imbued with certain exclusivity. Having been a caseworker in the public sector herself for many years, she understood “the language of administration,” as she put it. Her knowledge may be seen as a cultural coping resource (Lister, 2004; Titterton, 1992) that helped her in the welfare encounter.

Social goodwill from caseworkers comes in several forms. One of the activation technologies deployed by NAV to serve people undergoing vocational rehabilitation is a standardized electronic “employment status form” (ESF), which service users have to submit electronically every two weeks. Einar, who was in his 40s, received benefits because of complex personal problems involving serious mental illness and difficulties dealing with deadlines and money, which had resulted in a difficult financial situation. In periods of serious depression, Einar failed to manage the ESF, and so his benefits stopped. Therefore, his caseworker began to manage the ESF for him. At one point Einar’s caseworker was replaced. As a result, the ESF was not

submitted during a period where he was severely depressed to the point of rarely even getting out of bed. His benefits were cut and his bills went unpaid. Einar explains:

Suddenly the benefits stopped. (...) The last thing they told me was that I didn't have to send in these forms, as I'd had problems with that. (...) I'd gotten a new caseworker without them letting me know, and she didn't take care of it [administer his ESF]. And it took a while before I discovered it. (...) It was apparently a problem with communication in the NAV system, but I was the one who got burnt. (Einar, 40s)

Einar suffered from depression at the time. This is a condition that Hoggett (2001, p. 47) describes as a "collapse of agency." However, his first caseworker's goodwill enabled Einar to be kept secure financially. This was an act with substantial consequences for Einar's life situation at the time, and illustrates the relational aspect of agency (Wright, 2012).

### Welfare Subjects as Customers, Salesmen, Quasi-bureaucrats and Frustrated Citizens

At the time when Jonas (introduced above) experienced frequent caseworker changes, his case was at a critical point. For the purpose of illustrating the (sometimes) dynamic nature of agency positions, I will here focus on the step before, when he was granted vocational rehabilitation in the first place:

I had spent quite a bit of time online really, to check all my rights. And I knew those things well (...). It's really very quick, all the consultations, but that's because I had prepared myself so well, and that is what they said as well. I had read all my rights, everything I was supposed to do, up front. And I was a very pleasant customer for them ... or user. Right? Plain and simple. And they told me so. (Jonas, 30s)

The role Jonas describes taking on is very much in line with Hoggett's (2001) "reflexive subject" and Lister's (2004) "strategic agency." Jonas describes himself preparing for the meeting and looking into what kind of agency he has in the situation, learning the codes of the system. Perhaps coincidentally, he even

describes himself as a customer, a term not commonly used in the Norwegian welfare policy context. Although not in a customer role where he can choose between different providers in a market, his term of choice may reflect a mentality, a specific orientation towards the public services that may have helped him, as he does not feel any stigma, shame or embarrassment. On the contrary, he comes with high expectations of what the system can do for him.

While such expectations may illustrate a customer mentality, or at least an ideal actor making choices in a welfare “quasi-market” (Le Grand, 2003), his behaviour may also be seen as taking the role of a salesman, as he explains, justifying and selling his case to NAV in order to get access to the services and resources he wants. This form of “making out” (Greener, 2002; Hoggett, 2001) relates to an important aspect of accountability: the actor has an obligation to explain and justify his/her actions. Jonas expected NAV to do so. Although he faced difficulties closing the contract with NAV, he managed to get what he wanted, namely the funding of two years of education at a private learning institution.

Before getting the final approval from NAV regarding his choice of education, Jonas was faced with shifting caseworkers who failed to prepare his case. In this situation, his roles as customer and/or salesman had shortcomings. He tried asking different units in NAV for help, including his local NAV office and the call center. He kept calling, and kept going down to the office, insisting on being helped. Newman and Clarke (2009b) have shown how subversion of identities (such as service user, consumer, activist, citizen) may be used by individuals in order to exert their power. Jonas’ change of strategy, then, demonstrates the dynamic side of agency.

Acts of subversion in order to make the system adapt to them and their needs took several forms in the narratives of the participants in this research. Some interviewees told stories that involved engaging help from actors outside the NAV system, such as their union, and in one case, a social worker at a hospital who helped by mobilizing a doctor to write a letter of recommendation to handle the individual’s request for vocational rehabilitation as quickly as possible (Lundberg, 2012). These are acts of “getting by” and “playing the system” (Lister,

2004), reminding us of the sometimes interconnected and situational dimensions of agency (Wright, 2012).

Some of the interviewees also referred to situations where they tried to coordinate different units *within* the system. Case-workers at the local NAV office might ask service users to contact the casework unit for help. At a certain point, service users would try to make the different NAV units communicate with each other. In this case, they were trying to coordinate different "hands" in the system to work together. In doing so, they often referred to NAV's written guidelines, which require a level of agency relating to a sense of bureaucratic competence and reflexive agency (Hoggett, 2001).

Such acts may lead to taking positions as quasi-bureaucrats. Erna, a former teacher in her 40s, with a long career as a welfare subject in former and current welfare organizations, exemplifies this role clearly. She had learned a whole repertoire of tricks and skills to deal with the system, having experienced a variety of practices, including several bureaucratic errors that had led her into difficulties. I asked her if she thought it was difficult to manage the bureaucratic procedures:

No, I'm totally into that stuff, that's no problem at all. It's repetition, repetition. However, that's where they try to catch you: 'Perhaps your documentation is not in order?' Not at all. (Erna, 40s)

Occasionally she had experienced a delay in the processing of her case because NAV had lost her documents. Therefore, she started to take a copy of all the papers she handed in to NAV, and when talking to NAV on the phone, she made notes and asked for the names of the people to whom she was talking. In this way, she developed a routine and acted according to the role of a quasi-bureaucrat. This represents a particular everyday agency strategy developed from a particular bureaucratic context of the failings of the bureaucracy.

At one point, Erna submitted a receipt to get a refund for a tuition fee. Eventually, she went down to her local NAV office to ask why she had not yet received her money. The employee at NAV said that they had not received any receipt:

I take a copy of all papers I hand in to them. When I hand it in, I demand that they stamp it. They ... (say) okay, but they don't like it. And I say, 'And ideally, I'd like your name, too.' (laughs) One time I handed in a receipt for some tuition money. (...) After a few weeks, I went down and I asked them why the money hadn't come. And they asked me where I handed it in, because they couldn't find the receipt. I handed it in here, I said, so you must have lost it. 'Nothing gets lost here', she told me. 'Well, if you believe that, that's fine', I told her, 'but you can have a new copy from me, with the NAV stamp on it.' You should have seen her then. She got mad. (Erna, 40s)

This example of the welfare subject acting as a quasi-bureaucrat represents a form of agency that could be interpreted as "getting by," which is not too different from the reflexive subject position Jonas assumed (analyzed above). However, in this case the welfare encounter takes place in a social context where Erna's actions may also be understood as "getting (back) at" the system by beating it at its own game (Lister, 2004). The account shows a lack of trust and negative expectations regarding the system's capability to manage Erna's request, guided by experience. Her act makes NAV accountable by documenting their errors through the same textual devices that the system itself deploys in the management of its tasks.

As illustrated, these welfare subjects do not remain passive; they are active actors trying to solve bureaucratic issues and to make the system accountable to them. Some of them do this with greater success than others, and their agency positions may shift in different bureaucratic contexts. A number of more or less strategic attempts to activate NAV to be accountable in order to sort out bureaucratic errors are identified in Lundberg (2012). One interviewee described simplifying his case so that he would be treated more smoothly in the system, even though he knew he might be on the edge of the law in doing so. Another interviewee reported that in order to get sympathy from his caseworker and perhaps a quicker processing of his case when his pension was mistakenly stopped, he lied about his current economic situation (Lundberg, 2012). Such moves may be morally questionable, but they may represent a rational action strategy in the moment.

Einar, quoted above, felt a need to develop a relationship with his new caseworker in order to give her insight into his

current (variable) health situation. Unfortunately, he had trouble getting in touch with her:

I was told that I'd been assigned a new caseworker. And that caseworker, I've still never actually met her. I've been down (to the office) many times now; it's been over a year. (...) I've asked, I've called, I've been down there several times and told them that I want to talk to her, I've sent letters and emails, I've emailed her superior and referred to the attempts that I've made to get in touch. And I've asked her to get in touch with me and ... At one point; I heard that she was moving over to a different job, and that they thought that was why she hadn't contacted me. (Einar, 40s)

As indicated, these accounts, which highlight the position of the "reflexive object," are common in the data. Furthermore, several interviewees tried to overrule their caseworker by asking the management at their local NAV office to assign a new caseworker. As service users do not have a formal right to change their caseworkers, this may or may not work, depending on the social goodwill of the management. Service users may also use their voice by making formal complaints. At one point, Erna sent a formal complaint to NAV's complaint unit regarding failing casework procedures, loss of documents, and failure to process her case on time, as well as several experiences of bad service. She sent a lengthy letter and was disappointed with the short, formal letter she received in reply.

When welfare subjects feel that they repeatedly "hit a wall" within the system, there is the danger that over time, they experience a "failure of recognition" and frustration, which may lead to uncontrolled anger (Hoggett's non-reflexive subject) or even mental illness, such as depression (Hoggett's non-reflexive object). Erna sometimes struggled to control her anger:

I had high blood pressure and felt totally miserable, and I was short of breath and short tempered. So then I started to get back at them. I banged on tables and counters. (...) I remember that I told them (loudly): 'Where is the merger? Where is this fantastic merger between you? Where is it? You're more distant than ever before!' (...) You're in a very vulnerable situation and kind of fighting, sort of on the margins of society. I faced some kind of opposition to getting my rights. (...) It's horrible to say



it, but I understand if someone goes berserk at the NAV office. I'd go so far as to say I understand the mechanism inside the human being when they finally... yes. (Erna, 40s)

In the interview, Erna illustrated perhaps all four of Hoggett's (2001) types. In the account above, she reflects on the long-term consequences of suffering and "the real experiences of powerlessness" (Hoggett, 2001) after years of fighting a system that does not seem accountable to her. Her understanding of the mechanisms that make people snap or lose control of their emotions at the local NAV office indicates a painful realization of this point.

This point is relevant when evaluating threats and violence in welfare encounters. Since 2012, the Norwegian media and the national management of NAV have placed the problems of violence and threats from service users on the agenda, reporting an increase in threats and violence towards employees (e.g., *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 2013). In the summer of 2013 these issues also took a dramatic turn as a NAV employee died after being knife-stabbed on duty (*Aftenposten*, 2013). Threats and violence represent serious work environment issues for frontline workers in work and welfare agencies. In the research literature on welfare encounters, violence from welfare subjects is interpreted as a last resort for the underprivileged, as "the argument of those who have run out of arguments" (Dubois 2010, p. 167). Many of these actions also have a psychosocial dimension that can be understood as non-rational, "bad agency" (Hoggett, 2001; Wright, 2012).

## Conclusion

While the intentions of the NAV reform, one of the largest reforms in Norwegian welfare state history, were oriented towards service integration, many service users experienced a reproduction of dysfunctions in the new organization (see Andreassen & Aars, 2015; Ekspertgruppen, 2015; Lundberg, 2012). Problems illustrated in this paper include shifting caseworkers and various systemic errors related to information flows and coordination issues. As stated in the introduction, the paper aims to answer how service users perceive challenges with

coordination and fragmentation, and what kinds of agency positions are produced or required in this setting.

In the welfare subject–welfare system relationship, the individual is accountable to NAV through a range of duties, and the system has a range of routines, techniques and resources to sanction the individual if he/she does not carry them out. Requests from service users are treated within the system's administrative and institutional frameworks, technologies and bureaucratic procedures. Service users may complain through NAV's internal system, or they could make their voice heard in the media or by contacting politicians, ombudsmen or service user representatives. As shown in this article, they also try to make the system accountable to help them by referring to official guidelines, by acting as coordinators and quasi-bureaucrats, and by selling their case. An individual may take different and shifting positions in different situations, and the ability to do so is often required in order for the welfare subject to achieve favorable outcomes. Those who manage to contribute to constructive encounters leading to successful outcomes for themselves demonstrate agency as reflexive subjects.

Welfare encounters may be sites for social investments for some and sites for marginalization processes for others. As shown in the analysis, reflexivity is also needed in order to cope in simple in-the-moment situations in everyday welfare encounters. As I have illustrated, some of these coping strategies may turn into resistance. As Hoggett (2001) states in his seminal paper, welfare institutions do not exist exclusively through the interaction between individuals. The individual may experience the welfare state as a helping hand or as a closed fist. In that regard, the institutional apparatus of the welfare state under strengthened activation policies may contribute in producing "bad agency."

The analyses in this article have shown tensions being reproduced in the context of a one-stop shop reform linked to "the second wave of activation reforms" (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Minas, 2014). The empirical descriptions are in line with the findings of a recent and thorough report on NAV and its users (Ekspertgruppen, 2015). While the aims of providing integrated services and getting more welfare subjects into paid employment are yet to be realized, a straightforward answer to how the lessons from the NAV reform will influence Norwegian social

policy in the time to come is not easy to find. On a general level there is strong support for the Norwegian welfare model, but organizational reforms that are unable to fulfil their goals may clear the path for new answers to policy issues.

Recently, the lessons from the NAV reform have been mobilized by the current (right-wing) government's announcement of an implementation of more "flexible" labor legislation. One of the main policies in the new legislation will allow more, and longer, temporary employment contracts. These plans, which mark a shift in the Norwegian model, are backed by the argument that NAV is unable to help people with disabilities into employment (Arum, 2013). According to the proponents of the new policies, people with disabilities and people with scarce work experience will be able to get a foot in the door if employers can take them on temporarily, to try before they buy. In this way, failures of the NAV reform are mobilized to usher in policy changes in the neighboring policy field of labor legislation.

The lessons from the reform may also be used in other ways. Policy makers and other stakeholders aiming for quick solutions may announce welfare reforms more heavily grounded in symbolic politics of individual responsibility. This discourse, linked to an agency model of choice-making related to welfare dependency (see Deacon, 2004), may contribute to "othering" of underprivileged groups (Lister, 2004) in order to push forward a less inclusive-oriented and more disciplinary activation regime. This may produce frustrated citizens and destructive agency positions. Therefore, in order to hold policy makers accountable for their decisions, they need to be reminded that the welfare state should function as a security net, even for those who are not capable of a rational, reflexive subject position at all times.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>As elsewhere, the terms used to describe those targeted by welfare organisations are shifting away from, for example, "client" and "claimant." Currently in Norway, "user" is the politically correct term, in what is partly an effort to avoid stigma (Lundberg, 2012, 2013). The term "customer," which is favored in, for example, Britain's Jobcentre Plus, has never dominated in Norway.

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