

Public Employment Policy Professionals in Industrialized Countries

Different Contexts and Similar Practices

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Abstract

Based on a review of predominantly French, Canadian and American literature this article deals with employment coaching of populations excluded from the labour market. This is a new function that emerged from the activation of public employment policies over the past few years, and has become now the principal mode of commitment of the state towards populations excluded from the labour market. Focusing on the discourse and practices of counselling professionals, concerning the development of this function, the article highlights the impact of transactions between agents of public policy and their clients on the effects of reforms to social assistance programs. While day to day practices vary among coaching providers according to their specific environments, the literature review shows a convergence of practices among agents of public, private or community employment policies in the use of their own social networks, the constraints they encounter and the strong relational aspects they associate with their counselling function. In concluding, the article notes a lack of awareness of their roles as intermediaries in the labour market, in and in particular about their use of organisational procedures, strategies, and rationale for their actions.

Résumé

S'appuyant sur une recension d'écrits principalement français, canadiens et américains, cet article traite de l'accompagnement en emploi des populations exclues du marché du travail, une fonction ayant émergé de l'activation des politiques

publiques de l'emploi des dernières années et qui devient le principal mode d'engagement de l'État envers les populations exclues du marché du travail. En s'attardant particulièrement aux discours des professionnels de l'accompagnement sur la mise en œuvre de cette fonction, l'article souligne le rôle des transactions entre les agents des politiques publiques et leurs clients sur les effets des réformes des régimes d'aide sociale. Bien que les pratiques quotidiennes des chargés d'accompagnement diffèrent selon les contextes spécifiques dans lesquels elles s'inscrivent, des études recensées indiquent une convergence des discours des agents des services publics, privés ou associatifs des politiques de l'emploi en ce qui a trait à l'utilisation de leur réseau social, aux contraintes qu'ils rencontrent ainsi qu'à la forte dimension relationnelle qu'ils associent à la fonction d'accompagnement. L'article se conclut en constatant le manque d'information lié à ces acteurs intermédiaires du marché du travail, notamment sur leurs modes d'organisation, leurs stratégies et les justifications de leurs actions.

Introduction

While today labour market participation continues to be considered one of the principal markers for social integration of individuals, major population groups in industrialised nations are excluded from labour markets or, at best, are intermittent or sporadic participants. The emergence and persistence, globally, of high unemployment rates since the early 1980s have called into question the capacity of industrialised states to fulfill their role as producers of solidarity, which has brought far-reaching changes to the configuration of social protection systems. While retaining the outward trappings of liberal, conservative or social democratic models, these systems are subjugated to a new vision of the role of the state regarding more working-age vulnerable populations, around the principle of "activating" formerly passive modes of spending on income replacement (Provencher, 2004). Transition to a post-Fordian production model starting in the early 90s in industrialised countries initially featured a reduction of public expenditures for social protection, but it soon became a fundamental characteristic of far-reaching reforms of assistance policies around activation — policies for new income security plans, which subsequently became part of public employment policies. By linking social protection, employment policies and labour market, today's "activated" social assistance plans are focused on labour force engagement, the development of employment related skills and the smooth operation of labour markets. (Considine, 2001; 2005; Zeitlin and Trubek, 2003; Dhang, Outin and Zajdela, 2006). Operationalized according to different models that take into account the voluntary or compulsory nature of employment participation, industrialized nations' new "activated" plans include various tools and procedures such as employability or training programs, on-site practica sponsored employment, etc., meant to sustain employment for people who

are excluded from the labour market. Designed to serve individuals according to their challenges, and based on the use of field agents from the private and non-profit sector, these various assistance plans are currently considered integral components of active employment policies (De Foucault and Thévenot, 1995; Morel, 2002; Ulysse and Lesemann, 2004; Provencher and Bourassa, 2005; Dufour, Boismenu et Noël, 2003; Alternatives Économiques, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the role and influence of public employment service professionals within these “activated” social assistance plans. It will also point out the similarity of findings in research conducted in Canada, France and the United States about these professionals, despite the variations in political, legal, organisational and social contexts in which they carry out their activities.

I. Reinforced coaching of the unemployed: a key component of activated assistance plans

Overall, Canadian studies on issues relating to the “activation” of assistance plans have showed that individuals on social assistance lacked information about their rights and obligations concerning their voluntary or compulsory participation in workforce integration program, and that the employment assistance services they received were of little or no use in their joining the workforce or in improving their living conditions (Mullaly, 1997; HRDC, 2000; Klein and Long, 2003; NCW, 2003; Bourassa et Provencher, 2004; Frankel, 2005). A few studies pursued a deeper analysis of the effects of the reforms in various Canadian provinces by polling the views of people, who depend on social assistance for their income, and their experience of vocational training programs, especially in Ontario (Mitchell, 1999; Herd and Mitchell, 2002; Herd, Mitchell and Lightman, 2005), but also in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta (Kerr, Frost and Bignell, 2004; Sheldrick, Byron, Dyck and Mitchell, 2004; Graham, Jones and Shier, 2010) and New-Brunswick (Provencher et Bourassa, 2005, Provencher, 2007, 2008).

These studies also brought to light the need to learn more on the processes involved in applying these program measures and their impact on the broader objectives for the labour market participation of targeted clients. Follow-ups or counselling of the unemployed by public service employment officers is one of these processes.

In addition to the functions related to payment of benefits to unemployed individuals and to connecting job opportunities and job seekers, the various agents of employment policies are now saddled with new coaching or “vigorous follow-ups” with populations considered the most remote from the labour market to foster their sustainable job insertion, or at least, their exiting the protection system. Exemplifying the growing individualisation of services available to the unemployed,

this counselling role also demonstrates a new reality, where coverage for the social and economic risk of unemployment is no longer directly provided by the state but has become the responsibility of the assisted individual and the employment counsellor. Employment counselling has become the state's principal mode of commitment towards populations excluded from the labour market (MacDonald and Marston, 2005). Behind an obligation to actively search for jobs or to accept sponsored employment, participation in assistance programs, compulsory or not, sets out a new framework for the connection between state, individuals on assistance and enforcement agents of this policy, who are considered mediators for the labour market and held responsible for the employment of as many clients as possible (Gélot and Nivolle, 2000).

In concrete terms, two different sets of counselling services are offered by two categories of agents responsible for implementing the provisions of employment policies in industrialized nations. Depending on the type of assistance plan, these coaching/counselling services can be compulsory for recipients on benefits (workfare model) or in the case of voluntary efforts toward work force participation benefits linked with individualized coaching or close follow-ups can be added to or substituted for the system's basic allowance (Provencher, 2007). The first type of counselling services is associated with transmission of information and tools that will facilitate an individual's entry in the labour market such as information on local job opportunities, labour market trends and counselling. Various tools and instruments for effective job searching are offered through hints and advice on developing a résumé, preparing for a job interview, etc. A more personalized layer of counselling services can complement this basic level of services. It applies to population categories with identifiably greater risk of extended unemployment (poorly educated youths, people out of work for long periods, etc.). This second set of services is more often associated with plans based on voluntary participation in labour market inclusion programs, in contrast with compulsory plans where provision of benefits is linked with a recipients' participation in such processes (workfare model). Individual counselling for employability refers to three related processes: 1. reception and listening, 2. assistance in assessing their situation in regards to entering the labour market, and their opportunities, strengths and weaknesses to develop appropriate strategies to obtain and maintain employment; and 3. follow-up over time with individuals that have been coached. (Le Bouëdec, 2002). Based on their "diagnoses", coaches will attempt to identify their coachees' skills, and assess their motivation and level of independence to predict possible barriers in the process of labour market preparation.

Within this set of tasks and goals, the counselling process occurs in a contractually defined relational context between a professional and a person experiencing difficulties with employment (Bechrouri and Dô-Coulot, 2008; Guele, Sibeud, Rabeyrin and Devries, 2003; Le Bossé, 2000). "Individualized inclusion paths" are

developed from the many preparation mechanisms available (practicum, training, special workforce inclusion projects, etc.). In concrete terms, programs, activities and measures act as supports for the counselling staff, whose mission is to offer persons facing labour market challenges the means to end an inactive period or to find their first job. (Criff-Formation et Conseil, 2005).

II. Counselling professionals: Diversity of frameworks and similarity of views

Implemented under a variety of forms and delivered by public, private and non-profit operators, counselling services refer to two categories of actors responsible for coaching targeted client groups, who are the real intermediary/ implementors of public employment policies (Gélot and Nivolle, 2000). The first category applies to professionals described by Lipsky (1980) as *street-level bureaucrats*. They generally operate through public employment services and are usually responsible for determining eligibility to assistance programs, providing information on basic services and referral to so-called specialized labour force integration services (Meyers, Glasser, and MacDonald, 1998). A second category identified as *new street-level bureaucrats* by Smith and Lipsky (1993), are staff in private and non-profit or community organizations that are responsible for directly implementing public policy measures. They are funded by public authorities to organise activities and services in line with the objectives of employment policy through training programs for the unemployed, individual assistance for job search, etc. (Smith and Lipsky, 1993). These are for the most part professionals who offer customized back-to-work assistance to client groups targeted for counselling (single mothers, people with handicaps, troubled youths, long-term unemployed, etc.).

According to Lipsky (1980), these professionals act as go-betweeners for public policies and citizens. In general, public policies regarding human services, notably public employment policies, involve a slew of operational procedures and policy guidelines that determine the nature, limits and constraints of services provided by these policies. However, their limits and constraints are also part of the negotiations and interactions between clients and agents in the field, which provide the latter with substantial control and impact over both public programs, modes of regulation and clients. These complex institutional interactions in turn require detailed empirical investigation. (Hjörne, E , Juhila, K and C. Van Nijatten, 2010). Yet, as mentioned by Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco and Ketch (2009), very little is known about the role and influence of those directly responsible for the delivery of employment assistance services, or their strategies and decision-making processes in their work with clients. “[There is] a limited amount of research that has examined the experiences of front-line welfare-to-work staff and their decision-making practices.” (Austin et al., 2009; 108).

Involved in public, private and community networks of employment assistance services, their work is generally supported by a combination of technical and clinical skills. As bureaucrats using standardized procedures and clinicians attempting to understand and process particular cases, those responsible for the application/implementation of employment policies rely on their knowledge of local labour market conditions and of training availability in performing their employment counselling functions (Houzel, Outin and Ramaux, 2000). As such they are called on to explain services that might be on offer, provide counselling, networking opportunities and mediation, and assist in defining or redefining career plans and furthering skill development, etc. In addition to ensuring a good match between individuals' life plans and the means to attain them, agents are also responsible for arranging measures that will provide sustainable employment for populations targeted by these employment policies (Guele et al., 2003).

While counselling represents a professional function within formal organisations, its effectiveness lies first and foremost in the contractual relationship created with the individual excluded from the labour market, who is experiencing difficulties, and a professional with tools and expertise to resolve these difficulties (Guele et al., 2003). Counselling thus raises an issue of the multiple roles played by these professionals who are required to make a connection between their interpretation of the standards and rules of an assistance plan and an individual's resources and opportunities (Roulleau-Berger, 1998). But while coaches' day-to-day practices vary according to their specific counselling environment a number of studies conducted in France, Canada and the United States reveal a convergence of practices and views among counsellors working in public, private and community employment services, despite the structural diversity of these various assistance plans.

One element of convergence in the views expressed by employment services agents concerns their use of their social networks. In their study of employment counsellors in one southern US state, Livermore and Neustrom (2003) focused on real actions engaged in by these professionals to help the unemployed. While the activation of their own social capital is never mentioned in the job description of employment service agents, findings indicated that it occurs on a steady basis. Professionals use their social capital, defined as the set of aspects in social relations that are likely to benefit the individual, in two ways. On the one hand, they activate their social network to get information about available jobs to share with their clients. On the other hand, some professionals go further in the use of their social networks by exerting influence to get their client hired ... "*workers [...] used their own social capital both to obtain information about available jobs and to exert influence to get clients hired*" (Livermore et Neustrom, 2003: 97).

In France, similar observations were made by Baron, Bureau, Leymarie and Nivolle (1995) in their study of employment counsellors in the Paris region. They show that the professionals surveyed have built a network of relations that includes

employers and other local employment stakeholders, on a more or less formal basis of connections, common social identity and shared values and interests. In their work with employment seekers, intermediaries/counsellors give them access to their social networks and act as underwriters for their competence. This sponsorship means that employment seekers are spared the task of defending their skills and qualifications for the job.

Despite the often significant differences in the various countries' institutional structures, there is a strong convergence in the discourse of agents of public employment services concerning their relationship with their clients, particularly when it comes to processing applications and assessing the needs of employment seekers. In France for example, a study by Clasquin, Meyer, Charlier and Lioger (2000) on relations between agents of public employment services and potential employers shows that assessment of client needs is accomplished within a time frame that results for the most part in very short-lived relationships that are not automatically pursued/ maintained through personal follow-up with job seekers. Assessment methods are standardized, agents become interchangeable and their action proceeds mostly from the management of service requirements.

In their study on the interactions between public assistance workers and their clients, Meyers, Glasser and MacDonald show for their part that the content of their consultations has changed very little, despite the implementation of a reformed assistance plan based on workforce participation and that meetings between public employment agents and job-seekers are largely standardized.

Most interactions between workers and clients where highly routinized typically following a written script of topics or reviewing written application materials page by page.

(Meyers, Glasser and MacDonald, 1998; 13)

Agents involved in implementing programs under employment policies of industrialised nations express similar views when it comes to constraints related to their counselling work with clients.

While these constraints are sometimes related to specific employment requirements, others seem to be defined by the broader social environment that is shared by different post-industrial nations. Whether surveyed by Bell (2005) in Texas or by Houzel and al. (2000) in France, counselling professionals employment counsellors blame the troubled economic climate, with its segmented, selective and volatile labour market, for the lack of sustainable jobs. Professionals facing these global labour market conditions at the local level share feelings of powerlessness. In their views collected by Bell (2005), professionals point to the reality of jobs at minimum wage as a barrier to true independence for individuals on social assistance; others speak of their feeling of helplessness in trying to reconcile the push of

private enterprise to reduce the cost of their payroll but at the same time retain access to a qualified and efficient labour force (Houzel et al., 2000).

On both sides of the Atlantic, more complex profiles of clients, excluded from the labour force and the resulting increase in workloads are other common elements deplored by professionals. Various citing the number of files to be processed, the continuing pressure of dealing with an increasingly diversified clientele, and the multidisciplinary skills required by counselling functions, professionals agree on the substantial physical and mental demands of their work. In the United States, professionals report a lack of coordination among agents of the various inclusion plans in the face of extensive reforms to the welfare system (Bell, 2005). They also point out that the issue of client motivation or commitment makes their work more difficult. For their part, Houzel, Outin and Ramaux (2000) highlighted the testimonial of professionals in their survey concerning their reaction to the suffering of the populations they are called on to help.

The strong relational dimension present in counselling is underscored by both French and American studies. For Causse and Roche (2000), the ability of a coach to create a significant relationship with the person experiencing difficulties is the essence of employment counselling. According to these authors, the relationship is intersubjective in nature, the person is recognized as the subject of his own life, and represents the very purpose of the profession, which goes beyond simply a meeting between two individuals. Hasenfeld and Powell (2004) for their part emphasize the intense relationship between professionals and clients, claiming that the closeness of interpersonal relationships built through the counselling process is a feature of non-profit organisations that sets them apart from other inclusion mechanisms within the welfare system : “[...] *the close contact, interpersonal relations, and monitoring of the participants — the hallmark of these programs - makes them stand apart from the county’s welfare-to-work program*” (Hasenfeld and Powell, 2004: 104).

These studies conducted with professionals shows that counselling is practiced in a constrained environment that includes budgetary, political and timing restrictions, as well as the demands of clients served (Bell, 2005; Bessy, Eymard-Duvernay, Gomel and Simonin, 1995; Criff-Formation et Conseil, 2005; Hagen and Wang, 1993; Livermore and Neustrom, 2003; MacDonald and Marston, 2006; Meyers et al., 1998). On the whole, the discourse of professionals engaged in implementing employment policies points out the discrepancies between the mission of organisations that employ them and the resources available to realize these policies, both within the organizations (tools, mechanisms, organisation of services) and in reference to the broader socioeconomic environment and the reality of business operations (Houzel et al., 2000).

Research conducted in the United States, (Brodkin, 1997; Meyers et al., 1998; Hagen and Owens-Manley, 2002; Riccucci and Lurie, 2003; Abramovitch, 2005; Austin et al., 2009), Canada (Leclerc, Filteau and Bourassa, 2002; Frankel,

2005; Herd, Mitchell and Lightman, 2005; Provencher, 2007, 2008), France (Baron et al., 1995; Defalvard, Brun and Thibault, 2008; Gratadour and Mansuy, 2007) and even Sweden (Hjörne et al., 2010) concluded that the effects of welfare system reforms are largely related to transactions between agents of these policies and clients receiving assistance.

On the whole, these studies demonstrate that the role of employment services professionals goes much beyond a simple job implementation of insertion mechanisms and measures. They may differ widely among the variously structured plans they implement through their activities. These professionals are not only applying insertion mechanisms: they are literally building public employment policies, every day, on the front line, through their daily interactions with clients groups targeted by these policies.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by Sandfort (2000), those working within social assistance systems collectively develop know-how and application strategies for administrative regulations, using their judgement, their experience and their beliefs concerning their clients. While formal procedures and structures provide a framework for the work of case managers, they do not define their day-to-day actions. While stakeholders in western countries' new employment policies seem to agree on the advisability of offering individual counselling to ensure sustainable employment insertion for clients at high risk of extended unemployment, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the actions of these "labour market go-betweens, the way they implement these policies and their impact (Perret, 2008). Very little information is available on the organisation of their work, the strategies they use, and justification for their actions, particularly in view of the importance of their relationship with clients at risk of long-term unemployment.

In as much as the findings of research on the subject originating from both sides of the Atlantic show that agents of social assistance tend to assign greater priority to service delivery for clients who consult voluntarily and present fewer obstacles to employment (Gélot and Nivolle, 2000; Hagen and Lurie, 1995), they also raise the question of the meaning of counselling offered to client groups that present major obstacles to their insertion in the labour force. In these instances, what is the actual role of agents of public employment policy? In other words, how do social assistance plans[b1] - which now include public employment policies - deal with the issue of relationship with individuals who present major obstacles to employment insertion or who live in areas with typically elevated rates of structural unemployment?

Because various actors engaged in public, private and non profit employment services are directly involved in the attainment of employment objectives for

categories of vulnerable populations, any research to learn more on the impact of activating employment policies imperatively calls for research on their actions, especially when policies are based on reinforced counselling of the unemployed. (Simonin, 1995; Gélot and Nivolle, 2000; Zeitlin and Trubek, 2003). The questions now become: Do these actors have to compensate for the inadequate support mechanisms available for persons looking for employment and attempting to maintain it? Are they doing it by using their personal networks? More globally, which counselling models are being applied by professionals involved in public employment services in various Canadian jurisdictions? What are the organisational, economic, political and social factors that influence professionals in their choice of counselling practices?

We believe that a better understanding of the consequences and issues of the reforms of social assistance programs in Canada involves a study of the contexts where counselling takes place, and of the various counselling processes used by different agents delivering employment assistance services as part of these public assistance plans.

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