Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality

How recipients of social assistance in the Netherlands are 'activated' for the post-Fordist labour market

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Publication date
2020

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Arts, J. (2020). *Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality: How recipients of social assistance in the Netherlands are 'activated' for the post-Fordist labour market.* [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

Introduction: The focus on future employment in contemporary social assistance policy

From the introduction of the first Dutch social assistance law (Algemene bijstandswet) in 1965[1] to the most recent reform in 2015 (Participation Act, or Participatiewet), state-provided social assistance has been a recurring topic of public debate. Although the legal principle that the government must provide assistance to those who 'legitimately' reside in the Netherlands and lack sufficient means of subsistence remains unchanged,[2] the eligibility criteria, purpose and organisation of social assistance have undergone many changes. In contrast to social insurance benefits, entitlement to social assistance benefits (bijstandsuitkering) is not linked to employment status. The right to social assistance does not depend on one's employment history, as is the case with 'unemployment' and 'disability' benefits (werkloosheids- en arbeidsongeschiktheidsuitkering). For this reason, social assistance is often called the 'final piece' (sluitstuk) of the welfare state. It arranges social security for all, including those who are unable to generate enough income, do not qualify for other arrangements, and do not own enough wealth to provide for themselves (and their families).

Although the right to social assistance does not depend on one's employment history, it has come to depend on one's current activities to find future employment. At the same time, this future is increasingly insecure. In return for the right to benefits, social assistance recipients must participate in activities that teach them how to obtain and retain paid work in the future (compare Adkins, 2012 for this focus on the future). The right to social assistance has thus become conditional on

individual effort to find any kind of 'generally acceptable employment' (algemeen geaccepteerde arbeid) as soon as possible (see Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018 for an elaborate analysis of 'welfare conditionality' across welfare states). To enforce this duty, the Participation Act allows sanctioning actions deemed to "obstruct obtaining, accepting and retaining generally acceptable employment" (Article 18, paragraph 4g). Moreover, the Act specifies the kinds of 'obstructions' that require special attention: "clothing, a lack of personal grooming or behaviour" (kleding, gebrek aan persoonlijke verzorging of gedrag) (Ibid). Social assistance today thus entails focussing on future employment by enforcing specific present-day behaviours and aesthetic presentations among its recipients.[3]

This is, of course, not coincidentally so and must be understood in the context of historical developments concerning social assistance and the labour market. Developments in the Netherlands are not unique, and parallel those in other EU and OECD countries with well-developed welfare states, in large part due to the promotion and coordination of 'active labour market policies' through transnational agencies like the OECD and IMF (see for example Standing, 1990; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Peck, 2001; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Kenworthy, 2010; Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a; Triantafillou, 2011; Brodkin and Larsen, 2013; Brodkin and Marston, 2013; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Streeck, 2014). Although this dissertation focusses on the Netherlands, recent trends observed in this country largely mirror national welfare state reforms elsewhere – as the above-mentioned literature shows. Later in this introduction, I will outline my reasons for selecting the Netherlands as a case to study the focus on future employment in contemporary social assistance. But given the similarities of Dutch welfare state reforms with those in other countries, the lessons we learn here apply beyond this specific case. By studying a single country in-depth, this dissertation aims to add to the sociological knowledge of the myriad ways in which 'active labour market policies' take shape and affect the lives of citizens around the world today.

To understand the focus on the future employment of people receiving social assistance benefits in the Netherlands today, we need to connect it to the (recent) history of social assistance and labour market developments in the country. These developments in social assistance policy and the labour

market are part of broader changes in the organisation of social, political and economic life and are often interpreted as a shift from 'Fordism' to 'post-Fordism'. Fordism is generally used to describe the capitalist societies of the United States, Western Europe and Japan from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1970s. It is characterised, amongst other things, by mass industrial production and mass consumption, the ideal of the 'family wage' earned by a male breadwinner, relatively strong bargaining power of workers and labour unions, and a Keynesian (national) welfare state focussed on organising social security through full employment and various welfare state arrangements (see for example Jessop, 1992, 1994; Fraser, 2016; see Clarke, 1992 for a critical discussion of the concept 'Fordism'). Post-Fordism emerged in the mid-1970s and is characterised, amongst other things, by new information and communication technologies, the development of a globalised (financial) economy, a growing (interactive) service sector, the ideal of a 'two-earner family', declining bargaining power for workers and unions, and state intervention focussed on international competition through incurring public debt, privatising public services and fiscal consolidation (see Streeck, 2014), and promoting citizens' labour market participation in 'flexible' labour markets (i.e. 'full employability' as opposed to 'full employment') (Jessop, 1992, 1994; Fraser, 2016, also see Amin, 1994 for a more detailed discussion on the concept 'post-Fordism').

Considering the intertwinement of social assistance policy and labour market developments, this dissertation asks: How does the focus on future employment take shape in the context of contemporary social assistance policy and the post-Fordist labour market in the Netherlands? What exactly is required from recipients who are deemed 'work-ready' in return for obtaining and retaining the right to benefits? And what does this tell us more generally about the politics of social security? To answer these questions, I will examine the daily practices that constitute contemporary social assistance in the Netherlands – and more specifically, the 'labour market (re)integration' that is central to it – focussing specifically on the interactions between those who are responsible for providing social assistance (in terms of money and services) and those receiving it. Henceforth, I will refer to the former as 'case managers' and the latter as 'social assistance recipients' or, shortened, 'recipients'. Additionally,

following other scholars, I will refer to contemporary social assistance as 'welfare-to-work'.[4]

Understanding social assistance today entails examining the interactions between case managers and social assistance recipients, as it is through these interactions – in which case managers teach recipients the expected behaviours and aesthetic performances, as well as judge whether recipients are 'obstructing' their own path to paid work – that welfare-to-work policy takes shape. I will analyse my findings in light of reforms to Dutch social assistance and developments in the labour market, which I recount below. I then introduce the theoretical framework that informs this dissertation, before turning to considerations of case selection and methods. This introduction finishes with a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

The history of social assistance in the Netherlands

The 2015 Participation Act stands in a long tradition of private poor relief and state-provided social assistance in which the aim, and often the duty, of recipients to perform (paid) work and display 'civil behaviour' was (more or less) always present. Before the social assistance act of 1965, religious and private charities, and later also local governments, were responsible for providing material and non-material assistance to those in need. This 'poor relief' (*armenzorg*) was accompanied by far-reaching involvement in the lives of recipients. In return for receiving assistance, people were required to do all kinds of things, ranging from working in 'poor houses' to running 'decent' households. What are now known as 'civilising offensives' (*beschavingsoffensieven*) were central to the history of Dutch poor relief, and continued to inform practices well into the twentieth century (De Regt, 1984; Dercksen and Verplanke, 1987; De Swaan, 1988; Michielse, 1989; Van Houdt, 2014).[5]

According to Marga Klompé, the minister responsible for introducing the 1965 social assistance act (Algemene bijstandswet), the purpose was to make a law "to which every citizen could make a claim, with their head held high", a law "to which everyone who is in trouble, can make a claim, without getting the stigma of (...) [being] 'a failure'" (cited in Mosterd, 2011, p. 303). This law supplemented social insurance arrangements

(werknemersverzekeringen) that (temporarily) provided an income to workers in case of illness or unemployment. Although these insurances made families less dependent on the market, it maintained some peoples' dependence on their relatives (in case of inability to perform paid work) and married women's dependence on their spouses. Because married women primarily performed unpaid domestic and care work and were economically dependent on their spouses, in case of divorce, they (still) had to rely on religious and private charities.[6] The social assistance act of 1965 sought to make (poor) people and (divorced) women less dependent on their relatives and spouses by making social assistance into a legally enforceable right for all inhabitants of the Netherlands. It was part of a broader trend in which the government increasingly came to be seen as responsible for 'social work' (maatschappelijk werk), which included not only social assistance (bijstand) but also care for families, the young, the elderly, homeless people and people with impairments (maatschappelijke dienstverlening) as well as urban planning and community development (samenlevingsopbouw) (De Haan and Duyvendak, 2002, pp. 110-112). In contrast to the preceding history of 'civilising offensives', this period witnessed an increased focus on individuals and space for them to 'develop' themselves as they saw fit – even if this went against prevailing norms (Dercksen and Verplanke, 1987; Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2003). This did not, however, mean unlimited individual freedom. Behaviour deemed too far from the norm was met with correction, although this time authoritarian means were accompanied by therapeutic ones (Dercksen and Verplanke, 1987; Michielse, 1989; Van Houdt, 2014).

Social assistance as economic, political and moral problem

The global economic recession of the early 1980s and falling employment rates (CBS, 2010, p. 24) swelled the number of people receiving social assistance benefits in the Netherlands, from 215,000 in 1980 to 583,000 in 1985 (Ibid, p. 42). Claims for other social security benefits grew as well (although this had already begun in the 1970s), resulting in historically high social expenditures as a percentage of GDP (Van Vuuren, 2017). This occurred in many other countries as well. Governments (most notably in the US and UK, followed by other OECD countries) responded

by funding social expenditures through public debt (as opposed to income from taxes) and by gradually cutting social spending (Streeck, 2014). Consequently, as Wolfgang Streeck (2014) writes: "In the 1990s, governments began to worry about the rising share of debt service in public budgets, while creditors began to have doubts about the ability of states to repay their growing debt" (Streeck, 2014, p. 36). This marked the beginning of intense political debate resulting in drastic reforms of social security systems to "balance the [public] budget" (Ibid). Social assistance, as well as other social security arrangements, came to be seen as an economic problem ('too expensive' and 'unproductive'), a political problem ('too much government') and a moral problem ('too perverted', creating 'lazy, calculating citizens') (compare Engbersen, 1990; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Duyvendak, 1999).

Although welfare state reform had specific characteristics in each country, there were notable similarities between them, including the devolution of public policy, the marketisation of public services, the individualisation of social risks and the responsibilisation of citizens (see for example Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Peck, 2001; Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a; Brodkin and Marston, 2013; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). My choice to focus on the similarities as opposed to the differences between welfare state developments (see especially Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hall and Soskice, 2001) – and to look at local differences within a single national context – is based on the observation that nation-states are increasingly 'hollowed out' (Jessop, 1994) in the context of a globalised, financialised capitalist system (resulting in growing competitive pressures on a global scale) and the devolution of economic and political functions to transnational and subnational bodies (Jessop, 1994; Streeck, 2014). This is not to say that welfare states or their specific reforms necessarily (increasingly) look alike, but that the *processes of welfare state reform* under post-Fordism look alike (e.g. devolution of policy, marketisation of services, individualisation of social risks and responsibilisation of citizens). I contend that to focus on differences between welfare states and their specific reforms obscures the global economic and political processes that connects nation-states and the way they (have to) deal with these processes. In this dissertation, I aim to draw lessons from the Dutch case that are relevant for other national contexts

by means of connecting my findings to more general processes of welfare state reform (specifically with regard to social assistance) and labour market developments.

Dutch social security reform was characterised by three processes: 'marketisation', 'individual liberation' and 'responsibilisation' (compare Duyvendak, 1999; Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2003; Newman and Tonkens, 2011a; Van Houdt, 2014). First, 'marketisation' encompassed 'putting' public services 'in the market' (privatisation through tendering); bringing the market (logic) into public services (i.e. 'New Public Management', 'contractualism' (Sol and Westerveld, 2005), accountability and performance measures); and prioritising citizen participation in the labour market over their other roles (such as reproduction, care, and being a democratic citizen). Second, 'individual liberation' entailed enhancing individual 'autonomy', which was (and still is) synonymous to being 'independent' from social support by the government and the 'patronising interference' of government officials. Finally, 'responsibilisation' involved encouraging and obliging individuals to take responsibility for their own well-being, without the need of support from the government. These developments resulted in the paradoxical coming together of, on the one hand, freedom for individuals to determine their own path in life and, on the other, obliging and moralising (decentralised and marketised) interference to ensure that every individual 'chooses' the 'right' path (Duyvendak, 1999; Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2003; Ossewaarde, 2010; Newman and Tonkens, 2011b; Van Houdt, 2014). What came to be known as 'welfare-to-work' (or 'work-first', 'active labour market' and 'workfare') policies is a characteristic example of this.

'Welfare-to-work' as the solution

In the 1990s, social assistance policy turned to 'activating' social assistance recipients, whose need for benefits was deemed a problematic form of 'inactivity' and undesirable 'welfare dependency' (compare Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Van den Berg, 2016a). 'Activation' entailed enhancing and enforcing the labour market participation of benefit recipients through measures that assisted them to obtain suitable (subsidised) paid work. With the reformed social assistance act of 1996 and the new act of 2004 (*Wet*

Werk en Bijstand), it became an enforceable duty for recipients to accept 'generally acceptable employment' – as opposed to the former 'suitable employment' (Eleveld and Dermine, 2018). Recipients of social assistance became obliged to accept any type of employment offered to them,[7] as well as to participate in what are called 'labour market (re)integration services' (*voorziening gericht op arbeidsinschakeling* or *re-integratievoorziening*). The Dutch 'welfare-to-work' or 'work-first' policy took shape through these acts (Sol et al, 2008). The aim was to prevent people from claiming social assistance benefits (*instroom beperken*) and to increase the number of benefit recipients finding paid work (*uitstroom bevorderen*) (Ibid, p. 168).

Besides supporting and enforcing recipients' efforts to find paid work, municipalities became responsible for social assistance expenditures through a new budgetary mechanism, creating strong financial incentives for municipalities to limit entrance and encourage exit from social assistance programmes.[8] The devolution of responsibilities was accompanied by the marketisation of service delivery. At first, municipalities were legally required to contract out these services to private sector providers (Sol et al, 2008, p. 191). This requirement was later eliminated, leaving municipalities free to choose both the substance and organisation of labour market (re)integration services (in house and/or contracted out). In addition to the duty of recipients to find and accept 'generally acceptable employment', as of 2012 municipalities could demand that they perform 'socially useful activities' in return for social assistance benefits (*maatschappelijk nuttige tegenprestatie*). Although this measure was primarily meant as a means for direct reciprocity and a way to make people 'active' in society, not necessarily in the labour market (Eleveld and Dermine, 2018), it ultimately aimed to bring them closer to paid employment, or, in other words, to increase their 'employability' (Kampen, 2014).

At first, only a minority of municipalities required social assistance recipients to perform a 'socially useful activity'. This changed with the 2015 Participation Act, which obliged municipalities to do so (Eleveld and Dermine, 2018). With this act, people with impairments or caring obligations – including single parents – receiving social assistance benefits were no longer exempt from the requirement to obtain paid employment (Ibid). Depending on municipal policy, exceptions are made

for special circumstances; for this, recipients have to file a request for temporary exemption. In addition, recipients now have to satisfy more requirements, as "clothing, a lack of personal grooming or behaviour" deemed to "obstruct obtaining, accepting and retaining generally acceptable employment" (Article 18, paragraph 4g) have become grounds for sanctions. Since 2016, people are also required to be proficient in the Dutch language or to show progress in this direction (Article 18b). Alongside these changes, social assistance benefits – compared to the average income – have decreased over the last thirty years, in the Netherlands as well as in other OECD countries (Van Vliet, 2019). Rules concerning tax credits for social assistance benefits for couples were changed in order to 'make work pay' substantially more than benefits (see Geleidelijke afbouw van de dubbele heffingskorting, Kamerstuk 32 777, nr. 3). Housemates older than 21 years (alongside partners) are now taken into account (kostendelersnorm) when calculating entitlements, which can result in lower benefits. The idea is that housemates can share living costs such as rent and utilities.

In sum, the development of state-provided social assistance into 'welfare-to-work' can be summarised as the "individualisation of responsibility" and "valorisation of paid employment" (Patrick, 2017, p. 207) as people are made individually responsible for sustaining themselves (and their families) by earning money in the (labour) market. Whereas the first social insurances decreased families' dependency on the market and the social assistance act of 1965 decreased interdependencies within families (while increasing dependency on support from the government), later reforms have reversed these developments. With shrinking and shorter-duration benefits as well as tightened and increasingly complex criteria for eligibility, social security reform has increased peoples' dependency on the market and their families.

The right to social assistance – like many other social citizenship rights – has become something to be 'earned' through 'hard work'; it can be lost if people do not do their utmost best and make the 'right' effort (Van Houdt et al, 2011; Patrick, 2017). More concretely, the right to social assistance has come to depend on one's current efforts to obtain future employment. In other words, being without paid work means having to perform unpaid work today in order to potentially land a paid job

tomorrow (compare Adkins, 2012). To better understand how this focus on future paid work shapes the unpaid work required of social assistance recipients as part of their 'labour market (re)integration', we need to examine developments in the labour market, specifically: 1) the decline of industry and growth of the service sector, and 2) increasing precarisation.

Welfare-to-work in post-Fordist labour markets

Since the 1970s, the affluent societies of Western Europe and North America have seen industrial jobs moving overseas to countries where wages (and thus production costs) are much lower. Concurrently, the service sector became the largest in terms of both employment and economic value (Harvey, 1990; Kloosterman and Elfring, 1991; Van Zanden, 1997; De Beer, 2001; CBS, 2001, 2017). Paid work became increasingly precarious in three interrelated ways: 1) the growth of part-time[9] and low-paid work, variable and non-guaranteed hours, temporary and sub-contracted jobs at the expense of 'standard' employment (characterised by permanent contracts with sufficient, guaranteed hours and substantive employment and social protection rights); 2) the decline in bargaining power of workers and labour unions; and 3) the growing demand on employees to be 'flexible' in adapting to new tasks and acquiring new skills (Harvey, 1990; Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2011; De Beer and Verhulp, 2017; Kremer et al, 2017; Rubery et al, 2018).

The surge in service sector employment and the precarisation of paid work changed the skills required of paid workers. Flexibility, sociability, appearance and communication (i.e. 'soft skills' or 'twenty-first century skills') became pivotal (Urciuoli, 2008). To attain and retain employment, people now had to perform emotional and aesthetic labour (Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst et al, 2000). As Linda McDowell (2009) argues, these forms of labour are far from new; what is new is their spread from the domestic sphere to the market and thus from unpaid to paid labour (McDowell, 2009). With reforms to social security systems, what is also new is the inevitability that many people (especially women) in Europe (and beyond) are performing these types of labour in low-paid, insecure labour markets (McDowell, 2001, 2009). Melissa Gregg (2011) has further shown how new technologies bring the workplace to the home

(Gregg, 2011; compare Adkins, 2012). In sum, many people today are preoccupied by labour – before, during and after official working hours. In the words of Isabell Lorey, it "demands the whole person" (Lorey, 2015, p. 5).

In line with this, scholars have argued that the post-Fordist labour market mobilises affects beyond the emotional labour required to perform paid work (Hochschild, 1983). Paid work has come to be associated with 'love', 'passion', 'happiness' and 'belonging' and must 'fit' one's 'personality' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Duyvendak, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011; De Keere, 2014; Tokumitsu, 2015; Elshout, 2016; Weeks, 2017; Sage, 2019). Others point out that the 'Fordist' ideal of a stable career in which one can develop oneself and attain a secure future continues to animate both people and social assistance policies – albeit in terms of successive individual 'projects' rather than fixed career paths (Korteweg, 2003; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Berlant, 2007; Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012). According to the Dutch government, "a job offers people social contacts, self-confidence and the possibility for personal development".[10] But paradoxically, labour market 'flexibilisation' and the restructuring of social security in many countries led to the growth of an extremely vulnerable group deemed 'the precariat' (Standing, 2011; Vrooman et al, 2014; Savage et al, 2015; Ballafkih et al, 2017). For them at least, paid work does not offer "self-confidence and the possibility for personal development". Moreover, insecurity and vulnerability became broader social phenomena as the lives of more and more people grew increasingly uncertain and unstable. As Richard Sennett already noted some time ago: "What's peculiar about uncertainty today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead, it is woven into the everyday practices of vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal" (Sennett, 1998, p. 31).

For Lorey (2015), this 'state of insecurity' is not merely a (new) mode of capitalism, but a (new) mode of government in which risks (e.g. unemployment, sickness, poverty) are privatised and generating well-being increasingly becomes a matter of individual responsibility. Following the work of Michel Foucault, especially his conceptualisation of the term 'government' (see for example Foucault, 1982), Lorey develops the concept 'governmental precarisation' to argue that precarisation

"means more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security given by waged employment", rather it is "an instrument of governing" (Lorey, 2015, p. 1) in which state-government and self-government are entangled in particular ways. With this focus on the way we are governed by others (including state bodies) and by ourselves, Lorey aims to analyse the specific techniques that people use to (encourage others to) live with, or resist having to live with "the unforeseeable, with contingency" in work and life more generally (Ibid). As opposed to thinking of precarisation as something that only affects those that are imagined to be at the 'bottom-end' of the labour market, Lorey contends that precarisation affects everyone, as current working conditions "demand permanent availability while cutting labour rights and social rights at the same time" (Lorey, 2015, p. 95), everyone must join "the permanent race for the hoped-for securing of one's own life and that of one's immediate social milieu against competing others" (Ibid, p. 90). Precarisation entails people governing themselves and others in certain ways; to increasingly think of precarious working and living conditions as 'normal' and to endure and/or to resist this 'new normal'. In important ways, then, this 'governmental precarisation' and affectivity towards paid labour can be said to align. For many people, the way to endure paid work, as it is organised today, is to see it as a central purpose in life and their current precarity as a passing condition. In the words of Kathi Weeks (2017), the "acclaim for flexibility and resilience, the celebration of self-reliance and creative exuberance, is intended to manufacture workers who will embrace rather than protest insecure conditions and intensified workload that are increasingly endemic to the contemporary employment contract" (Weeks, 2017, p. 54; compare Tokumitsu, 2015).

Welfare-to-work policies thus revolve around the prominence and promise of paid work in a precarious labour market that requires a certain type of labour and relation to this labour. Moreover, due to its conditionality and aim of labour market (re)integration, welfare-to-work policy renders social assistance itself precarious, necessitating a certain type of labour outside of the labour market (compare Adkins, 2012).

Studying welfare-to-work as governmental precarisation

In the Netherlands and elsewhere, the development of welfare-to-work policies is part of a wider set of policy reforms encouraging and compelling citizens to be 'active' in civil society and, particularly, in the labour market – both deemed to improve peoples' lives and society as a whole while reducing public expenditures. These policy reforms and their implications have been described and analysed in great detail (see for example Standing, 1990; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Peck, 2001; Clarke, 2005; Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a; Newman and Tonkens, 2011a; Muehlebach, 2012; Brodkin and Marston, 2013; Kampen, 2014; Van Berkel et al, 2017; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Scholars have examined how 'welfare dependency' has been defined as a problem to which social assistance reform, with its focus on control and improvement of recipients, is the solution (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Dean, 1995; Cruikshank, 1999; Rose, 1999; Dean, 2002). Others have shown how welfare-to-work policies produce classed, racialised and gendered subjects (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Korteweg, 2003, 2006; Dubois, 2010; Brady, 2011; Soss et al, 2011; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Skeggs, 2015; Patrick, 2017; Krivonos, 2018, 2019). Still others have argued that through stricter eligibility criteria, 'creeping' conditionality, the focus on low-paid work and harsher sanctions, welfare-to-work policies are slowly closing off social assistance as a way to sustain oneself outside of the market, thereby undermining its social security function (Dwyer, 2004; Wiggan, 2015; Greer, 2016). In this way, stigma is built into welfare-to-work policies as "an object lesson, instructing low-income populations that even the meanest wages and work conditions are better than the shameful status of the 'welfare poor'" (Schram et al, 2010, pp. 739-740; compare Ben-Ishai, 2012; Tyler, 2013).

From a Foucaultian 'governmentality' perspective (see Rose et al, 2006), 'welfare-to-work' has been studied as an example of the myriad ways in which citizens are governed today – by others and themselves – to become 'entrepreneurial' individuals focussed on economic success (see for example Dean, 1995; Rose, 1999; Dean, 2002; Rose, 2006). Scholars have shown that a broad range of actors, including but not limited to state bodies, participate in the practices that comprise this 'governing' (see for example Cruikshank, 1999; Fridman, 2014). In addition, welfare-to-work consists of all kinds of 'expert', often pedagogical, practices that

seek to achieve certain goals (e.g. enhancing social cohesion, individual happiness, economic productivity and international competitiveness), based on certain knowledges of individuals (e.g. as bearers of 'human capital' and emotional beings, (not yet) capable of making 'the right' choices, in need of 'soft' or 'hard' paternalist interventions) and the society in which they live (e.g. organised around paid work and principles of reciprocity). Welfare-to-work thus encompasses many specific ways of knowing and thinking about the 'problem' of 'unemployment' and 'welfare-dependency' and how these should be addressed (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Dean, 1995; Cruikshank, 1999; Rose, 1999; Dean, 2002; McDonald and Marston, 2005; Rose, 2006; Newman, 2010; Brady, 2011; Pykett, 2012; Brady, 2014; Van Houdt, 2014; Whitworth and Carter, 2014; Whitworth, 2016).

This dissertation builds on these insights and brings them into conversation with the above-mentioned literature on (governmental) precarisation. This means I will examine welfare-to-work as a political 'solution' to the 'problem' of 'unemployment' and 'welfare-dependency', in which recipients are stigmatised while social assistance as a means to sustain oneself outside of the market is gradually closed off. In addition, and following Lorey (2015), I understand welfare-to-work as part of a wider process of 'governmental precarisation' in which labour market and social security policies together maximise and normalise insecurity and create a "social vulnerability that is still just tolerable" (Lorey, 2015, p. 66). My aim is to empirically study this 'governmental precarisation' by examining contemporary social assistance and, more specifically, the 'labour market (re)integration' of social assistance recipients. Studying 'labour market (re)integration' is well-suited to revealing the dynamics of 'governmental precarisation' as this is where one way for individuals to secure their position in society (by means of social assistance benefits and services) is replaced by another (earning money in the labour market).

To gain deeper insight into what 'labour market (re)integration' consists of in the Netherlands today – how it is shaped and lived daily by those involved – I use ethnographic methods (elaborated below) to observe and experience the day-to-day practices of 'labour market (re)integration services' offered in three local social assistance offices. By observing and participating in the practices and interactions of those deemed to be the

'problem' (social assistance recipients) and those deemed central to the 'solution' (case managers) of 'unemployment' and 'welfare-dependency', I aim to understand how – in the context of welfare-to-work policy – individuals are made responsible to secure their positions through paid work in the current precarious labour market.

I study these practices and interactions within the delimited timeframe and demarcated space of the social assistance office – also known as 'The social service' (De sociale dienst)[11] – while realising that governing social assistance recipients neither begins nor ends there. Social assistance offices are concrete places that allow us to observe how people are governed (by others as well as themselves) to become employable in the post-Fordist labour market. Within these spaces, I focus particularly on the centrality of future employment: on what case managers teach recipients who are deemed 'work-ready' about obtaining and retaining (precarious) paid work, and what exactly is required of them in return for benefits. Ultimately, by analysing the daily practices that constitute 'labour market (re)integration', I aim to contribute to a better understanding of the particularities of 'governmental precarisation' that are central to the politics of social security today. The following sections elaborate on my case selection (of the Netherlands, as well as of selected municipalities) and research methods.

The case of the Netherlands

To understand the scope, variety and impact of welfare-to-work policies and practices around the world today, we need to study their local manifestations within their contemporary and historical (inter)national contexts. Scholars have compared national welfare-to-work policies (e.g. Peck, 2001; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Korteweg, 2006; Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a; Kananen, 2012; Brodkin and Larsen, 2013; Brodkin and Marston, 2013; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014; Van Berkel et al, 2017; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018) and focussed on local cases in a single national policy context (e.g. McDonald and Marston, 2005; Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012 in Australia; Korteweg, 2003; Soss et al, 2011 in the US; Muehlebach, 2012 in Italy; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Patrick, 2017 in the UK; Kampen, 2014; Sebrechts, 2019 in the

Netherlands; Pennisi and Baker Collins, 2017 in Canada, and Krivonos 2018, 2019; Haikkola, 2019 in Finland). Like these latter examples, this dissertation is based on research in a single welfare state context – in which there can be, due to the devolution of public policy and the marketisation of public services, many local varieties of welfare-to-work. In order to grasp this variety, I have chosen to study multiple local cases within a single national context.

While many countries – as the above-mentioned literature suggests – are interesting cases to study, I chose to focus on the Netherlands for several reasons. First, welfare-to-work policy is well-developed as the Netherlands adopted this type of policy early on (Van Berkel, 2011; Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld, 2016; Van Berkel, 2017). Also, the organisation of welfare-to-work – which services are offered and how they are offered – is largely decentralised. Municipalities have ample room to devise local social assistance policies and practices. The Participation Act requires municipalities to offer services to social assistance recipients, to demand active participation, and to impose sanctions if recipients do not fully meet the requirements. But local policies and practices vary in terms of the type, amount and intensity of activities that social assistance recipients are required to do, as well as in the severity of sanctions (Van Berkel, 2017), allowing us to study a variety of welfare-to-work policies and practices within a single country.

Second, the Netherlands has one of the most 'flexibilised' labour markets in Europe (De Beer and Verhulp, 2017; Kremer et al, 2017). Labour market 'flexibilisation' has not affected everyone equally. People with primary and secondary education more often have insecure employment contracts than people with tertiary education, although the latter increasingly have precarious contracts as well, especially as self-employed 'entrepreneurs' and unpaid 'interns' (Van Vulpen and Van den Berg, 2016; Dekker, 2017; Van Vuuren, 2017). Finally, long-term poverty and 'in-work poverty' are growing in the Netherlands (Noordhoff, 2008; Snel et al, 2008; Hoff et al, 2016, 2018; Vrooman et al, 2018). This is no coincidence: people with precarious contracts run higher risks of falling into poverty (Van Vuuren, 2017; Vrooman et al, 2018). It is thus timely to research how, and based on what ideas, social assistance recipients in the Netherlands are 'activated' towards the labour market, given that paid

work will rarely provide them with a stable footing on which to build a better future.

Categorisation of social assistance recipients

What is offered to and required of social assistance recipients varies between categories of recipients. Social assistance recipients are generally categorised into two groups, within which further subdivisions are often made at the local level (Van Berkel, 2017). The first group consists of those who are deemed 'work-ready' (or with 'a short distance to the labour market', '*een korte afstand tot de arbeidsmarkt*') or 'able to work' ('*werkfit*'), and who are expected to find paid employment in the foreseeable future. 'Work-ready' social assistance recipients are thus offered (obligatory) 'labour market (re)integration' services geared to exiting social assistance as soon as possible. The second group is deemed 'not work-ready' (yet) due to 'obstacles' – such as lack of (recent) employment history, (mental) health issues, language barriers and/or severe financial problems that require attention first. They are said to have 'a long distance to the labour market' ('*een lange afstand tot de arbeidsmarkt*'). In contrast to the former group, this group is offered (obligatory) 'social support' or 'activation' services, ranging from sheltered work places (although these are barely offered anymore) to 'volunteering' and community activities (see for example Kampen, 2014; Sebrechts, 2019). For this group, 'social participation' is the immediate goal, 'labour market participation' the longer-term goal (Ibid). Under the Participation Act, municipalities can offer additional services to social assistance recipients with certain impairments, such as active mediation between recipients and potential employers, and offering financial incentives to employers in order for recipients to find a (subsidised) place to work.

The Participation Act has different rules for 'young' people (up to 27 years of age) and people of pensionable age (65 years and older). The former have schooling options while the latter are no longer required to do paid work. In addition, people who aspire to earn money through entrepreneurship are offered a separate service (to set up a viable enterprise) from those who (have to) seek paid employment. My research focusses on the latter group. More specifically, it looks at welfare-to-work

policies targeting people between the ages of 28 and 65 who do not have impairments or suffer from severe health and/or financial issues and are thus deemed 'work-ready'. Some have (recently) lost their jobs and are in need of social assistance benefits as they have exhausted their rights to unemployment benefits. Others were previously deemed 'not work-ready' but have been 'activated'; now considered 'work-ready', they have been referred to 'labour market (re)integration services'. The obligation to find paid work is expected to be most pronounced for social assistance recipients who are deemed 'work-ready' since they are perceived as healthy, able members of the labour force who are, more than others, expected to independently provide for themselves.

Three local social assistance offices

As local governments in the Netherlands are relatively autonomous in devising and implementing social assistance policies in accordance with their own political views and purposes, I selected three local social assistance offices with the aim of maximising inter-municipal diversity or 'variation' (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The aim of this study is not to compare municipalities and analyse the observed differences, but to get broad insight into the various ways in which Dutch welfare-to-work policy works out in daily practices in different locations. Within the three municipalities, different services – under the umbrella of 'labour market (re)integration' – target social assistance recipients who are deemed 'ready' to find paid employment and thus to exit social assistance in the foreseeable future.

The three local social assistance offices were selected on the basis of municipal population, number of social assistance recipients, proportion of recipients compared to the national average, geographical location, local policy objectives, sanctioning policy, the organisation of (re) integration services (internal and/or externally contracted) and their policy instruments (see table 1). The selected cases include two of the four largest cities in the Netherlands, both with approximately 40,000 social assistance recipients at the time of fieldwork. While both are above the national average in the proportion of social assistance recipients relative to the population, they differ in their policy objectives and frameworks. The third social assistance office was a partnership between several

	Local office 1	Local office 2	Local office 3
Number of inhabitants	> 500,000	< 100,000	> 500,000
Number of social assistance recipients	± 40,000	± 1,400	± 40,000
Percentage of social assistance recipients	Above national average	Below national average	Above national average
Location	Urban area ('Randstad')	Suburban area	Urban area ('Randstad')
Official policy aim	Paid employment as soon as possible	Participation (not necessarily paid employment)	Participation (not necessarily paid employment)
Sanctioning policy	Relatively strict	Relatively lenient	Relatively lenient
Organisation of (re)integration service	Internal/municipal	Internal/municipal and external/contracted (private organisation)	Internal/municipal
Policy instruments	Group meetings Individual meetings (Un)paid work (at least 8 hours a week)	Group meetings Individual meetings	Group meetings Individual meetings Unpaid (internal) 'internships'

Table 1: Overview characteristics of selected municipal social assistance offices.[12]

suburban municipalities ('gemeenschappelijke regeling') that together had approximately 1,400 social assistance recipients at the time of my fieldwork. The proportion of social assistance recipients is below the national average while its policy objectives are not as explicitly pronounced as the other two cases. The three local social assistance offices are described in greater detail below.

Local office 1

Social assistance office 1, located in one of the four largest Dutch cities, accommodated several departments offering a range of social assistance services. At the time I was present, the office employed a four-week waiting period in which social assistance recipients considered 'work-ready' were expected to do their utmost to find whatever paid employment they could find (and be able to prove this). This 'active behaviour' was necessary to receive social assistance benefits as well as to retain this right. Once access to benefits was granted, 'work-ready' recipients were referred to a department focussed on rapid labour market (re)integration. My fieldwork took place in this department, which employed around 30 case managers. Their tasks consisted of 'coaching' and 'motivating' recipients, administering their cases, 'matching' them to available job vacancies and enforcing policy rules.

The department offered all 'work-ready' social assistance recipients living in the city a labour market (re)integration programme lasting fifteen weeks, consisting mostly of group workshops and (un)paid work. Recipients were obliged to attend a 'general information meeting' and CV-workshop in the first week. During the general information meeting, the purpose of the programme was explained and recipients were reminded of their duties and rights (among them the complaint procedure). The purpose of the CV-workshop was for all recipients to have a CV with which they could immediately apply for jobs. In the programme's subsequent weeks, recipients were required to participate in three-hour workshops twice a week and complete homework assignments. Case managers would regularly invite recipients for individual conversations in which their desired progress and personal problems were discussed. In addition, social assistance recipients were required to perform paid work for at least eight hours a week. If this was not possible, they had to

work, unpaid, for eight hours a week for a contracted employer. After following this programme, social assistance recipients who did not find paid employment were (sometimes) transferred to a department offering 'social support' or 'activation' services, or (more often) to a department that focussed less on 'training' and more on directly 'matching' people with vacancies.

Most case managers working in the department were employed by the municipality – either on temporary or permanent contracts. Some were temporarily 'hired in' from a job agency or as self-employed case managers (Zelfstandige Zonder Personeel (ZZP)). Their work was closely monitored; updates of individual performance – the number of social assistance recipients exiting social assistance – were circulated through the department each week. In addition, case managers would sometimes be addressed by their superiors if they were suspected of leniency; imposing sanctions was seen as a performance indicator.[13] A third way in which case managers' performances were monitored – added after my period of fieldwork – was social assistance recipients' evaluations. For this, case managers were required to ask recipients to fill in an evaluation form upon exit (either to the labour market, or, after fifteen weeks, to another department).

I gained access to this department through a personal contact who referred me to the department manager. The manager told me I would have to ask permission from the case managers themselves, as my aim was to observe them doing their work. She therefore invited me to a department meeting in which I could introduce myself and explain the purpose of my research to all case managers. The case managers agreed to grant me access to their department. But to observe their work with social assistance recipients, we agreed to let it depend on the willingness of recipients as well as the delicacy of the specific situation, as judged by case managers. As a result, I was not always able to attend group workshops and observe individual conversations between case managers and recipients, especially when there was potential for conflict. For a researcher, this is an undesirable but inevitable reality of fieldwork. At the end of the department meeting, one case manager, upon my request, agreed to guide me through the department. I started observing her and her direct colleagues (as they were working in teams) as well as asking

them a lot of questions. She helped me to expand my fieldwork to the rest of the department by introducing me to other case managers and asking them if I could observe their work. Most, but not all, case managers agreed to let me attend group workshops and/or individual conversations with social assistance recipients.

Access to the floor on which this department was located was easy, as it was open to social assistance recipients from 8:45 in the morning – around the time I arrived – until 16:00 in the afternoon. My presence was not an anomaly as the department was almost always full of people (case managers, team managers, reception desk and administrative personnel, security officers, policy makers and social assistance recipients). The department consisted of a large hallway, twelve 'classrooms' and two open spaces with tables, chairs and coffee machines. At least two security guards walked around the department each day. Attached to each classroom was a small office, called a 'fish bowl' (as it was see-through from all sides). In small teams of two or three, all case managers were assigned to a particular classroom in which they would provide workshops to their group of social assistance recipients. They used the 'fish bowl' for individual conversations with recipients as well as for administrative work.

The morning workshops took place every day from 9:00 to 12:00 and the general information meeting was held four times a week from 9:30 to 12:00 in the largest of the twelve classrooms. Case managers took turns providing this general information meeting. From 12:00 to 13:00 the department was closed and case managers would have their lunch break. Like them, I would spend this time alone or with others (mainly the same small group of case managers that would have lunch together) inside one of the classrooms or outside the building. The afternoon workshops took place every day – except Tuesdays – from 13:00 to 16:00. Every other Tuesday, there was a department meeting from 13:00 to 16:00. On the Tuesdays when there was no meeting scheduled, the case managers would use this 'free' time to catch up on administration.

Each social assistance recipient was assigned to a group and had to attend one morning and one afternoon workshop every week, according to a group-based schedule. To cater to the needs of recipients, the department organised groups on the basis of their education level (i.e. special groups for 'higher educated' recipients) and computer skills (i.e.

special groups for people who were not experienced with computers). After 16:00, all recipients and some case managers would leave (some had begun their working day at 7:00, some at 8:00). Others would attend to administrative tasks.

Local office 2

Social assistance office 2 was a partnership ('*gemeenschappelijke regeling*') between several local municipalities, located in a building adjacent to the town hall of one of the municipalities. In this local office, case managers worked in three groups: 1) 'coordinating' case managers responsible for keeping an overview of cases, maintaining contact with social assistance recipients, and sanctioning non-compliance; 2) 'work' case managers, to whom the (almost) 'work-ready' recipients were referred by the coordinating case managers, for 'guidance' to the labour market through individual coaching and group workshops; 3) externally contracted case managers working for a private company specialised in 'labour market (re)integration'. This third group was responsible for offering all kinds of support to 'not (yet) work-ready' recipients, preparing 'almost work-ready' recipients for employment through individual coaching (to 'overcome personal barriers'), and directing 'work-ready' recipients towards the labour market (again by means of individual coaching). The latter tasks thus overlapped with that of the 'work' case managers working directly for the social assistance office.[14] Performance – the number of social assistance recipients exiting social assistance – was closely monitored at the team-level (i.e. the two teams of 'work case managers' and 'external case managers'). One of the 'work' case managers working directly for the social assistance office had a permanent contract; another was self-employed (*ZZP*) and temporarily hired in, while the other three had temporary contracts. All case managers worked in the same building housing the local social assistance office, albeit in different rooms.

Like the first local office, this social assistance office required people who applied for benefits to do things in return before receiving anything. In this case, potential social assistance recipients were to meet with a 'coordinating' case manager in order to 'check their eligibility' and determine their 'work-readiness'. They were then required to attend

two group meetings: one 'general information meeting' in which they were informed about the formal duties and rights attached to receiving social assistance benefits, and a 'workshop' that focussed on how to go about finding paid employment. Only after attending all three meetings were people entitled to social assistance benefits granted this right. Subsequently, (almost) 'work-ready' recipients were offered (obligatory) individual counselling several times a week. Instead of – or sometimes in addition to – this, some recipients were required to participate in weekly two-hour group workshops, which ran over a period of eight weeks. After this period, recipients would either continue participating in the workshops, receive individual counselling, and/or were referred to other public or private sector service providers.

I arranged access to this department through a personal contact acquainted with the director of the local office. I was granted access following a meeting with the director and members of the 'management team', and after the case managers had given their permission. While the building housing the social assistance office was accessible during office hours, the offices in which the case managers and other staff members worked, and the coffee machine, were behind a closed door. I received a special key for this door and an empty desk in the office of the 'work' case managers. In contrast to local office 1, the case managers in this office spent most of their time behind their desks rather than in front of a group of social assistance recipients. The office was relatively quiet, as small groups of recipients would attend group meetings only once or twice a week. The rest of the time, they would visit the office for individual meetings with their case manager. Since there was not as much for me to observe as in local office 1, I spent most of my time in the office with the case managers. I asked them to take me along when they had meetings with recipients but, especially in the beginning, they would often forget to do so. In local office 1, I had many possible moments to observe; here I had to work hard to be able to observe case managers interacting with social assistance recipients at all. But as time passed, I was increasingly included, talked to, taken along to group and individual meetings with recipients, and invited to lunch.

Local office 3

Like local office 1, social assistance office 3 was in one of the Netherlands' four largest cities. This municipality offered a range of services that 'work-ready' social assistance recipients, 'consulted' by their case manager, could more or less 'choose' from. Although some form of activity was required of all recipients, its exact form (e.g. individual counselling, group workshops, internships) differed depending on individual recipients' needs as judged by their case manager. Social assistance recipients had the option to request a 'second opinion' if they disagreed with their case manager's judgement. They were granted the use of these services for up to two years. After this, they were referred to another department as they would no longer be considered 'work-ready' and receive services aimed at social participation (for now) rather than direct labour market participation.

Like local office 2, this social assistance office divided the case managers into those responsible for keeping an overview, offering individual counselling and sanctioning non-compliance, and those 'training' social assistance recipients for the labour market in group workshops. But unlike local office 2, all case managers were employed (either permanently or temporarily) by the municipality. At the time of fieldwork, and partly due to pressure from the labour union, many case managers who previously had temporary contracts now had permanent positions. Local social assistance policies had also recently changed. This meant that some case managers were "working according to the old way" – focussing on rapid labour market (re)integration by using sanctions, if necessary – while others were "working according to the new way" in which social participation was deemed more important than labour market participation and the use sanctions was a measure of last resort.

During fieldwork, I mostly focussed on the work of the case managers responsible for 'training' social assistance recipients in group workshops. There were several types of workshops. First, the 'Introductory training' for people who had just started receiving benefits lasted for three weeks and required recipients to attend workshops three times a week, three hours a day. A central aim of this 'Introductory training' was for each social assistance recipient to devise an individual plan with a concrete aim (what kind of job they were looking for, where, for how many hours, etc) and concrete steps to take in order to achieve this aim. At the end

of the three-week training period, each recipient would discuss this plan with their personal case manager and agree on the next steps. For some recipients, one such next step was attending the 'Job centre', another training programme in which they were assisted to find paid employment in three-hour group workshops, once a week for thirteen weeks or twice a week for six weeks. The 'Introductory training' and 'Job centre' were offered separately for 'higher educated' recipients and adapted to their perceived needs. Those who had not found paid work by the end of the two-year period in which they could access labour market (re)integration services were offered 'Intensive group counselling'. This entailed, once again, attending weekly three-hour workshops for a period of thirteen weeks, where they were assisted to find paid positions. Instead of – or in addition to – the group workshops, social assistance recipients were offered individual counselling and internal (at the municipality) or external (at an employer) unpaid 'internships'.

It was difficult for me to gain access to this social assistance office as the municipality received many requests to participate in research projects. Especially with the new Participation Act, case managers were overwhelmed by researchers. But with help from a personal contact acquainted with the alderman responsible for local social assistance policy, I was referred from the managerial 'top' to the practitioners. After months of talking to people at the municipality, I came into contact with a team manager of one of the many teams of case managers responsible for assisting the whole range of social assistance recipients in this city. The team manager introduced me to some of the case managers and I found my way from there. I did not have access to the offices in which the case managers prepared for meetings with recipients and attended to their administrative tasks. I was sometimes invited 'up' to their offices, but could not go there without a case manager taking me. During my fieldwork I mainly entered and exited the building on the ground floor, like the social assistance recipients.

In contrast to the two other offices, it was more difficult for me to understand the specifics of the case managers' work and the structure of their organisation – who did what, why, and who formed a team with whom – as I was never able to get complete access to their 'world' of local social assistance. The department in local office 1 was clearly demarcated

from the rest of the services this municipality offered to social assistance recipients while local office 2 was small – both in terms of space and number of employees – and thus easy to oversee. But local office 3 was in a large building housing several departments. The many case managers, working in different spaces around the building, were responsible for (re) integrating all kinds of social assistance recipients into the labour market. To pursue participant observation with a variety of case managers, I asked the ones I had already talked to and observed to introduce me to their colleagues. As a result, I found my way through the building, meeting, talking to and observing different case managers – some regularly and intensively, others more fleetingly.

Research methods and ethics

Research for this dissertation began in the spring and summer of 2015, when I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 case managers and 2 local policy makers in three Dutch municipalities – together with Marguerite van den Berg and Sanne Hoekstra. At this time, one of the two large municipalities (local office 3) declined to participate in the study due to the large number of studies it was already participating in. For the interviews, we thus selected a new third location, similar to local office 3 in terms of local policy objectives and sanctioning policies. This new location offered an expansion of variation in my case selection due to the municipality's population (± 200,000), number of social assistance recipients (± 7,100), proportion of recipients (only slightly above the national average) and geographical location (urban, but outside of the country's central urban area called '*Randstad*'). In addition, its organisation of (re)integration services was in the process of being relocated from a central local office to neighbourhood teams. At the time of the interviews, the case managers were still working from the municipal office in the city centre.

Between January 2016 and November 2017, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the three local offices described above. I visited local office 1 for over four months between January and May 2016, local office 2 for approximately four months between October 2016 and January 2017, and local office 3 for over five months, between May and November 2017. I generally visited all offices two or three times a week,

with few exceptions (e.g. due to illness or when specific activities were planned) when I would visit more or less often. I observed and sometimes participated in 76 (local office 1), 39 (local office 2) and 51 (local office 3) formal meetings (individual and group meetings with case managers and recipients, and team or department meetings). I also observed and participated in countless informal interactions (before and after formal meetings, both in and outside the office).

Semi-structured interviews

The 18 interviews with case managers and local policy makers were semi-structured and lasted between twenty minutes and one hour. Their aim was twofold: first, to hear how those working within the new Participation Act interpreted, translated and implemented its aesthetic requirements into local policy rules and practices, and second, to gain access to the offices in which social assistance is granted in order to pursue ethnographic fieldwork. The interviews focussed on case managers' experiences, perceptions, opinions, judgements and actions regarding, and in response to, the aesthetic performances of social assistance recipients. They were asked about the options at their disposal when recipients did not comply, and to give concrete examples of situations when this occurred and what action they took. Case managers were specifically asked whether they had ever financially sanctioned recipients due to what they judged to be inappropriate appearance. Case managers were also asked whether recipients' 'inappropriate' appearance could be altered, and whether this was deemed desirable. Finally, they were asked whether the Participation Act had influenced their daily practices concerning the aesthetic presentation of social assistance recipients, and why they thought aesthetic considerations were explicitly included in the act.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed through a combination of conventional and directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Some categories were defined before data analysis – drawn from the literature on 'activating' social assistance and aesthetics – while other categories were derived from the data during analysis.

Ethnographic fieldwork

To study the Participation Act's translation into daily practice, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in all three local social assistance offices. I understand ethnography to be "a family of methods" that constitutes "the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events" (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p. 6). The fieldwork included (participant) observation, informal interviews and casual conversations with case managers (and to a lesser extent with their superiors) and the recipients of social assistance. 'Informal interviews' differed from 'casual conversations' in that I asked questions and took notes. The latter were more fleeting and were captured in my field notes (as soon as possible) after they occurred.

The 'informal interactions' I observed and sometimes participated in consisted of conversations between case managers and social assistance recipients, among case managers themselves, among social assistance recipients themselves, and between case managers and their superiors. These 'informal interactions' occurred before and after formal meetings, in and outside the office, in the hallways, at the coffee machine, during coffee breaks and lunch time. The 'formal meetings' I observed and sometimes participated in were of three types: 1) individual meetings between case managers and recipients; 2) group meetings with case managers and recipients; and 3) team or department meetings. I once participated in the eight-hour unpaid work activity that was part of recipients' obligations in local office 1. The second category of formal meetings (group meetings) consisted of two types: 'general information meetings' for recipients who had just applied for benefits, informing them about their rights and duties, and 'workshops' geared to find paid work where recipients learned – among other things – how to find vacancies, write a CV and motivation letter, approach potential employers, present oneself 'properly' and perform in a job interview. The meetings were always led by two case managers but the number of participants varied, ranging from about four to fourteen participants in workshops and ten to fifty participants in general information meetings.

My research focusses on the interactions between case managers and social assistance recipients because interactions between these two parties are the primary means through which welfare-to-work policy takes shape. Case managers assess recipients and make decisions within, and based

upon, these interactions (compare Van Berkel, 2011). For most of the time I spent observing, I sat in a room, taking notes (with pen and paper), barely participating in the interactions that took place between others. But I was not always only an observant as my active participation was required when I was spoken to, invited to participate, asked a question, or asked to tell something about myself. Such occasions became more frequent over time, after I was present at a local social assistance office for some weeks.

My role was always somewhere between being a (participant) observer and an observing participant, depending on what the case managers and social assistance recipients required of me. If they did not ask me to participate, I would take the role of observer. If they did, I would participate more actively. My participation took many forms. For example, case managers would sometimes ask me to 'push the buttons' while they gave a PowerPoint presentation as part of the information meeting or workshop. Another (completely different) example was a six-week course on finding paid work designed especially for 'higher educated' social assistance recipients. The case managers providing this course allowed me to attend all the meetings on the condition that I would fully participate like the recipients. At that time, I had one year left in my temporary contract as a PhD candidate. I thus agreed to participate and think ahead about, as well as practice for, applying for jobs in the near future. During this six-week course, I was part of the group of social assistance recipients – although not completely, of course, as everybody knew I had a job and was there because of it. Still, because I fully participated, I got to know some of the people in this group quite well. They were the only ones I kept in touch with for some time after the course was finished.

Recording and analysing data

As welfare-to-work policy aims to '(re)integrate' social assistance recipients into the labour market, premised on the idea that they need guidance to find paid work, I specifically focussed on how this 'guidance' takes shape. What do case managers teach social assistance recipients about (finding) paid work? What, according to case managers, must recipients do? How do case managers legitimise these demands? Finally, when and how do case managers decide that social assistance recipients are not (fully) meeting the

requirements of local welfare-to-work policy, that they are 'obstructing' their path to paid work? In sum, I focussed on how the criteria and practices of 'evaluating' and 'guiding' social assistance recipients were collectively produced, contested, actualised and justified on a day-to-day basis in local social assistance offices.

All observations were recorded in written notes (during or as soon as possible after the observation) and committed to extensive digital field notes (using word processing software) on the same day or within a few days. My methodological approach of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) entailed an iterative process of, first, using extant theories on welfare-to-work, post-Fordist labour markets and governmentality to guide and interpret my empirical observations, and second, systematically gathering, describing and analysing observational data and letting this push my theorisation "in unexpected directions" (Ibid, p. 2). The literature thus provided me with broad background knowledge while fieldwork enabled me to look for patterns (i.e. recurring interactions, practices and themes), similarities and differences, as well as contradictions (Ibid, p. 126). Based on my observations, I engaged with new theories, pursued further fieldwork, and re-analysed my findings – an approach that enabled me to make sense of the local practices that constitute welfare-to-work policy in the Netherlands today.

Research ethics

During fieldwork, my role as researcher was always disclosed and often visible as I took notes on paper during observations in 'formal meetings'. I asked all those involved (social assistance recipients, case managers, their superiors and others) for permission to observe them at least once (at the beginning of each new workshop series, or when new participants joined) and regularly repeated that I was a researcher and was present at the office for the purpose of my research. I repeated this especially when I suspected it was unclear or seemed forgotten – when I was (either by the case managers or the social assistance recipients) referred to as an intern (often), as a case manager or someone working for the municipality in another capacity (sometimes), or as a recipient of social assistance (rarely). Whenever I met a new person (a case manager, social assistance recipient or

otherwise), I introduced myself as "a researcher working for the University of Amsterdam" and explained the purpose of my research as "examining the implementation of the Participation Act in daily practices in the local social assistance office". I was open to questions about my research and, upon request, would elaborate on my position as a PhD researcher as well as the research questions I was seeking to answer. I always explicitly stated that I was *not* working for the social assistance office or municipality. In addition, as case managers could accept or reject my request to observe their work beforehand, but social assistance recipients were more or less confronted by my presence, I always stated that they did not have to agree to my presence and could tell me to leave at any time.

I repeatedly told all persons I observed and conversed with that their anonymity was assured. This was particularly important for the social assistance recipients, some of whom expressed concerns about being monitored by case managers and/or the municipality. I would never write down their full names (nor did I know their full names most of the time) and only wrote down their first names for the purpose of my own field notes. I promised that I would not share their names with others or use their names in any publications, and that although I would refer to personal particularities such as age and educational background, unless they requested me not to, I would limit detail to ensure anonymity. Some of the case managers I observed and conversed with were outspoken about my presence and note-taking. But as I spent more time with them than with the recipients, I could build relationships based on trust; as a result, some felt free to tell me things "off the record". Depending on the subject, I would sometimes include such remarks in my field notes, but not in publications. "Off the record" information thus informed my analysis but is not committed to writing in this dissertation. In one location, I had to work harder to establish relationships with case managers and gain their trust due to (previous and upcoming) reorganisations that made my presence both unclear and seen as a potential threat. Here, I made extra effort to spend time in the presence of case managers when no interactions with recipients were occurring. I would spend full working days, sometimes even without observing any interactions between case managers and social assistance recipients, doing my own work.

To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents and

informants, all data are anonymised by omitting names as well as characteristics that might enable acquainted readers to trace the data back to specific individuals. To direct attention to the interactions and the conditions under which they took place, I have not used pseudonyms. I distinguish between social assistance recipients (R) and case managers (CM), as well as 'job hunters' (JH), 'recruiters' (RC) and 'account managers' (AM), as they were part of daily practice in the social assistance offices.[15] At the end of each period of fieldwork – to leave the field properly and to present preliminary findings to check whether these made sense to them (i.e. respondent validation, see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 183) – I scheduled individual meetings with the case managers whom I had observed and conversed with multiple times.

My research analyses local welfare-to-work programmes in order to understand contemporary social assistance in the Netherlands as well as the politics of social security more broadly. This means that I understand the interactions between case managers and social assistance recipients in the context of these programmes and politics. I do not analyse the work of case managers in order (for others) to judge them and their profession; nor do I analyse the responses of social assistance recipients in order (for others) to judge them and their need for income support. Rather, I analyse the local practices that constitute welfare-to-work and 'labour market (re)integration' in the Netherlands as a window on how precarious populations are governed today. With this research, I wish to contribute to public debate on how to collectively stand up to contemporary precarisation through a politics that privileges inclusion rather than exclusion, care rather than repression, solidarity over individual responsibility, and security instead of insecurity.

A note on concepts

In this dissertation I refer to 'social assistance', not 'welfare'. The choice is deliberate, for several reasons. First, the Dutch word *bijstand* literally means 'assistance'. It originally intended to assist people in need who were not expected to earn an income in the labour market as they performed reproductive work, had caring obligations, or impairments that prevented them from performing paid labour. Second, the word 'welfare' to designate

social assistance policy has its origin in English-speaking countries and is often understood to signal an unjustified dependency on the state, implying that those who receive benefits are 'passive' and 'pathological', thereby denying both structural inequalities and the centrality of dependency in the human condition (Lister, 2017, p. xii). Third, I contend that the term 'social assistance' better signifies the arrangements it encompasses (money and social services), which are part of a larger system of social security that has come to be known as 'the welfare state' in which the 'welfare' (or 'wellbeing') of all individuals is the aim and social assistance arrangements are (in theory at least) a means to this end. Whether and how social assistance contributes to (which) individuals' welfare is an empirical question. It would therefore be inaccurate to imply that 'social assistance' self-evidently leads to 'welfare'.

Following this reasoning, I would prefer referring to contemporary social assistance as 'social assistance-to-work' rather than the commonly used 'welfare-to-work'. But to speak to the extant academic debate on the subject and to avoid confusion, I refer to 'welfare-to-work' policies and programmes (the latter are the more practical translations of the former). The concepts '(labour market) activation' and 'activating welfare' are generally used when referring to the continental European context, while 'welfare-to-work' and 'workfare' often signify the British and American context – in which the former is said to be the "less punitive and pejorative translation" of the latter (Peck and Theodore, 2001, p. 428). These concepts, however, are subject to debate, as is their coupling to specific national contexts (see for example Caswell et al, 2017). In the Dutch context, the term '(social) activation' or '(sociale) activering' is mostly used when referring to policies that aim to enhance the participation of recipients who are deemed 'not (yet) ready for paid work' in unpaid activities such as language courses and volunteer work. Therefore, I take 'activation' to encompass a broader array of programmes (and target groups) within social assistance policy, aimed at 'participation in society' and not exclusively at participation in the paid labour market. In addition, I understand 'workfare' to be a specific form of social assistance policy that entails obligatory (un)paid work activities (see Peck and Theodore, 2001). Social assistance office 1 could be called 'workfare', but offices 2 and 3 are more ambiguous. Inspired by Caswell et al (2017),

I understand welfare-to-work as "programmes and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability [and] labour-market (…) participation of [partially] unemployed benefit recipients of working age, usually by combining enforcing/obligatory/disciplining and enabling/supportive measures in varying extents" (Caswell et al, 2017, p. 3). The local social assistance policies that I study in this dissertation are geared towards the immediate labour market participation of recipients deemed 'work-ready' through different measures (in some cases, including obligatory paid or unpaid work activities). These activities are referred to as '(labour market) reintegration' or 're-integratie'/'terugkeer naar werk'. As these activities are aimed at 'labour market participation' ('re-integratie'), as opposed to 'participation in society' ('activering'), and they do not necessarily require recipients to perform work activities in return for benefits ('workfare'), I contend that 'welfare-to-work' is the most appropriate term to designate the social assistance policies and programmes I study.

The persons who shape welfare-to-work programmes and thus 'make' contemporary social assistance policies in important ways – i.e. Lipsky's 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010/1980)[16] – are referred to as 'case managers'. Their job titles differ between municipalities, from 'customer manager' and 'consultant' to 'trainer' and matchmaker' (i.e. matching persons to jobs). I have chosen to use the term 'case manager' as this is the term most often used in the international literature when this group is referred to. Although not exclusively, this term is also used by the designated professionals themselves.

In the local offices studied for this dissertation, people claiming and receiving social assistance benefits were referred to as 'customer', 'job seeker' or 'candidate' (i.e. a potential candidate for a job). But as Nancy Fraser (1989) argues, social assistance recipients occupy a "subject-position that carries far less power and dignity in capitalist societies than does the alternative position of purchaser" (Fraser, 1989, p. 152). I argue that the same holds for 'job seeker' and 'candidate'. She adds, moreover, that "to be a client (in the sense relevant to relief recipients) is to be an abject dependent" (Fraser, 1989, p. 152). Here Fraser is referring to a long history in which being dependent on poor relief or state benefits became deviant and stigmatised, while other dependencies (on paid labour) came to be celebrated (Fraser and Gordon, 1994) – a reality that still holds

today (see for example Kampen et al, 2013; Tyler, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Therefore, following Fraser (1989), I prefer the term 'recipient' over the commonly used 'client'. Together with my former point about speaking of social assistance rather than welfare, I use the term 'social assistance recipient', or 'recipient' for short, to refer to people receiving social assistance benefits.

Chapter overview

This dissertation consists of four chapters, preceded by this introduction and followed by a conclusion. Chapter 1 is based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in local office 1, and addresses the *aesthetic dimensions* of welfare-to-work policy, starting from the aesthetic requirements contained in the Participation Act. In this chapter I examine, together with Marguerite van den Berg, the aesthetic performances required of social assistance recipients to retain their right to benefits and how case managers use aesthetics as pedagogy to cultivate 'work-readiness' and 'adaptability'. We argue that *everyday aesthetic labour* is pivotal in post-Fordist labour markets and that, in times of precarisation, this applies to both formally 'employed' and 'unemployed' populations.

Chapter 2 is based on ethnographic fieldwork in local offices 1 and 2 and addresses the affective dimensions of welfare-to-work policy. Together with Marguerite van den Berg, I examine the 'pedagogies of optimism' central to daily practices within the local social assistance offices. We show how case managers use the techniques of 'accepting', 'controlling' and 'imagining' to teach social assistance recipients to accept their precarious position, to embrace it and to prepare for its continuation while remaining optimistic about better times to come. Importantly, case managers in Dutch social assistance offices are themselves often precarious, making the affective labour they perform both difficult and essential for themselves. We argue that welfare-to-work programmes are characterised by precarisation on both the receiving and providing ends of the state–citizen encounter and that social assistance today encourages acceptance of this state of precarity.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into the (re)production of the ('Fordist') ideal of paid work as the primary avenue for decent subsistence, to

achieve something in life, and to be a valued member of society. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in all three social assistance offices, it examines the techniques of 'introspection' and 'imitation' that case managers use to solve the tension of espousing (Fordist) ideals of upward mobility through paid employment at a time when the (post-Fordist) labour market barely offers social assistance recipients any routes to a stable career. The chapter shows that the affective labour social assistance recipients must perform consists not only of thinking and feeling 'positive' about their current situation and prospective future, but of thinking and feeling certain ways about themselves, their 'personality', and learning ways to 'know' and 'improve' themselves for paid work. Alongside imagining a better future, they have to imitate it in exercises where they must give 'the right' (aesthetic) performances which in theory will enable them to achieve the desired life. Social assistance offices thus function as temporal spaces of imagination in which adherence to the promise of upward mobility through paid work appears as a form of 'post-Fordist affect'.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 show how social assistance recipients in the Netherlands are 'activated' for the post-Fordist labour market – through cultivating the promise of paid work, (presentations of) 'the right' aesthetics, affects and personalities, and imitating (closeness to) paid work. Chapter 4 is also based on ethnographic fieldwork in all three social assistance offices and addresses the different modes in which recipients are directed towards paid labour through pressing, repressing and accommodating modes of governing. It analyses the differences (between as well as within local offices) in the approaches used by case managers, enabled by the decentralisation of policy design and implementation and case managers' room for discretionary action. I show how these practices are legitimised by stigmatising the need for income support, in effect constructing social assistance recipients as 'revolting subjects' (Tyler, 2013) while leaving little room for them to revolt against dysfunctional policy and wrongful treatment. Building on the republican theory of non-domination (Lovett, 2010; Pettit, 2012), I argue that the observed differences and limited room for social assistance recipients to voice their concerns suggest an arbitrary application of – and insufficient democratic control over – Dutch welfare-to-work policies.

Together, the four chapters reveal the work that goes into obtaining

and retaining the right to social assistance in the context of welfare-to-work and post-Fordist labour, as well as the pedagogical techniques that case managers use to entice, persuade and coerce social assistance recipients to find paid work. Aesthetic and affective labour, requiring 'self-knowledge' and 'self-improvement', are the central ways through which social assistance 'deservingness' is assessed and 'work-readiness' is performed and achieved. It is by looking presentable, feeling optimistic and performing potentiality that social assistance recipients are deemed able and willing to find paid work and to improve themselves and their positions in society.

INTRODUCTION