



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Looking presentable, feeling optimistic, performing potentiality

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

Arts, J.

#### 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].

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Chapter Two: Pedagogies of Optimism

### Teaching to ‘look forward’ in welfare-to-work programmes in the Netherlands \*

#### Introduction

The whiteboard in a Dutch social assistance office is decorated with information leaflets, drawings and small posters reading “Someone who wants to [achieve something] looks for possibilities. Someone who doesn’t [want to achieve something] looks for a reason” and a newspaper clipping about “12 reasons why older employees are worth gold.” On the desk of one of the classrooms, a case manager has put up two posters, reading: “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious. – Albert Einstein” and: “Where your talents and the needs of the world cross; there lies your vocation. – Aristotle”. In another office, in another municipality, a Nelson Mandela poster reads: “It always seems impossible until it is done”.

Inspirational quotes are everywhere in the Dutch social assistance programmes that we address here. The affective language of dreams, passion and possibility is invoked often in these contexts where otherwise quite punitive and restrictive policies are executed. The posters and quotes

---

\* A version of this chapter has been published as: J. Arts and M. van den Berg (2019) Pedagogies of optimism: Teaching to ‘look forward’ in activating welfare programmes in the Netherlands. *Critical Social Policy*, 39(1), 66-86.

decorate spaces in which ‘pedagogies of optimism’ take place – encounters between case managers and social assistance recipients in welfare-to-work programmes that are set up, in part, to teach citizens to feel certain ways about the predicament they are in and teach them to ‘look forward’ as a way to stimulate happy feelings. Pedagogies of optimism, we contend, appear at the conjunction of social assistance restructuring and precarisation (Lorey, 2015) of labour markets. When both social assistance provision and labour are becoming more insecure and contingent, stable footing is sought in the hyper-individualised strategy of ‘feeling optimistic’ and an orientation towards the future. What is at stake here is, thus, a pedagogy of feeling<sup>1</sup> and a particular futurity: social assistance ‘activation’ focusses on teaching citizens to accept their precarious position, to embrace it and to prepare for its continuation while remaining optimistic about its discontinuation. Perhaps cruelly (compare Berlant, 2011), then, the state teaches citizens to develop optimism towards certain imagined futures while, at the same time, acknowledging the unattainability of such futures.

After decades of restructuring and austerity, social assistance policy across Europe, including the Netherlands, has moved its focus from offering a safety-net to offering incentives to enhance labour market participation and much more conditional access to social assistance rights (Dwyer, 2000; Borghi and Van Berkel, 2007; Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011a; Wiggan 2015). These programmes include a collection of pedagogies often termed ‘activation’: participation programmes, welfare-to-work arrangements, course work. Janet Newman’s (2010) conceptualisation of the ‘pedagogical state’ is appropriate, as the programmes focus on teaching citizens ways of being and doing that are thought to promote labour participation.

At the same time, labour market relations have grown increasingly insecure, rendering paid workers precarious across social positions. Precarisation, Lorey (2015) argues, has become the norm, even within developed welfare states. Contemporary neoliberal states, Lorey contends, function on the basis of offering a minimum of social assurance while maximising instability. In her work on precarity and precariousness, Judith Butler has argued that, indeed, precarity “is not a passing condition (...) but a new form of regulation that distinguishes this historical time” (Butler, 2015a, p. vii). Other scholars have argued that

the above-mentioned policy shift not only amounts to increased precarity of unemployed populations but also to the production of labour power for insecure labour markets (Wiggan, 2015; Greer, 2016). Jay Wiggan (2015) argues that social assistance programmes in the UK work to deepen low wage labour market ‘flexibilisation’ by narrowing eligibility and strengthening work-related conditionality, thereby gradually closing off “social security benefits as a route to sustaining oneself outside of the employment relation”, leading social assistance recipients “into a cycle of poor jobs-no jobs” (Wiggan, 2015, p. 377). For social assistance recipients’ everyday lives, this means that they are in and out of precarious labour on the one hand, and in and out of welfare-to-work programmes on the other. Welfare-to-work programmes and precarious labour, moreover, are very alike in terms of types of activities and income levels. Participation in welfare-to-work programmes and labour markets are therefore best understood as stages in a continuous situation of precarity (compare Adkins, 2012 for this focus on continuity).

In this chapter, our interest is in the affective dimensions of the pedagogies that teach citizens to accept this situation of precarity while at the same time teaching strategies to escape that same situation. We depart from theories of affect and precarisation and look in detail at state–citizen encounters that highlight precariousness and pedagogies of optimism because, again in the words of Butler: when we reveal precariousness, we also reveal “the failures and inequalities of socioeconomic and political institutions” (2015b, p. 21). In short, the aims of this chapter are: 1) to argue that (Dutch) social assistance today is not so much offering a safety-net or durable integration in the paid labour market, but is rather offering ways to accept a state of precarity through pedagogies of optimism; 2) to argue that these pedagogies entail teaching recipients an acceptance of a precarious present and an orientation towards the future; 3) to show in some detail the actual techniques that go into these pedagogies of feeling; and 4) to argue that this can in part be explained by the relative precarity of case managers themselves.

## **Governing precarity through affect**

Precarisation as a form of government, for Lorey (2015), entails governing

through the condition of insecurity. The state offers a minimum of support while maximising instability. This entails particular pedagogies and subjectivations: citizens and workers learn how to be this insecure. Modern government is, of course, always concerned with such intimate subjectivations (Rose, 1989). Here we build on governmentality perspectives on the moralisation of citizenship (e.g. Schinkel and Van Houdt, 2010) and perspectives on state pedagogies (Clarke, 2005; Newman, 2010; Newman and Tonkens, 2011a) to study how precisely the Dutch state teaches its citizens to feel certain ways about their precarious position. Conceptualisations of ‘affective citizenship’ (Muehlebach, 2012; De Wilde, 2015) have drawn attention to the ways in which government now mobilises affects such as a sense of belonging (Duyvendak, 2011; De Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016) and compassion with others (Berlant, 2004, Muehlebach, 2011). Following Andrea Muehlebach, we understand affective labour as central to the “unwaged labour regime” that relies on producing “good feeling”, and is “valued by the state and other social actors” because it presumably contributes to fostering social cohesion (2011, pp. 61-62).

The Dutch state, as we will show, is, however, not only interested in teaching citizens compassion and responsibility, but, importantly, also optimism (compare Friedli and Stearn, 2015 for the UK context). In this chapter, we will bring together the above-cited literatures on state pedagogies with literatures on affect which theorise the importance, or even obligation, of having ‘positive’ feelings towards oneself and one’s future, as individual optimism and happiness are seen to generate desired social outcomes (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011; compare also Ehrenreich, 2009), such as citizens’ employability (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) argues how optimism is understood to be a mental state that can be developed through practice and discipline (Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 4). She claims that the idea that “all things are possible through an effort of the mind” (Ibid, p. 12) has become especially popular in times of decreasing job security. Sara Ahmed (2010) contends that happiness has not only become an individual obligation, but also an instrument to lead people towards “happy objects” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21): norms or ideals that are claimed to be ‘good’, like, in our case, being in paid employment and independent from social assistance. “The promise of happiness”,

then, has to be cultivated in order to direct individuals to the ‘right’ direction, by means of education for example (Ibid, p. 54). Others have observed this mobilisation, or imposition, of positive affect in the context of social assistance policy and practices (Cromby and Willis, 2013; Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Stories of social suffering are thus actively written out of the appropriate experience of precarity to make room for happy stories (compare Ahmed, 2010) of entrepreneurship, perseverance and future opportunities.

This chapter explores the daily practices at two social assistance offices in the Netherlands as a case of ‘governmental precarisation’ (Lorey, 2015) in which pedagogies of optimism are a fundamental technique. Building on repertoires of empowerment (originally a concept used in counterhegemonic efforts, see Cruikshank, 1999; Sharma, 2008), ‘activation’ thus involves emotional empowerment. In the pedagogies that we study here, ‘activation’ takes the meaning of generating feelings of hope and optimism. Case managers often have only temporary, insecure and low-paid jobs to offer social assistance recipients and are acutely aware of the precariousness of recipients’ situation, often acknowledging that they have no real exit to offer from this state of insecurity. Still, social assistance recipients are obliged to accept these precarious jobs, because otherwise they risk losing social assistance benefits. Working towards ‘work-readiness’, then, involves teaching a certain state of mind and stimulating certain affective labours: optimistically accepting precariousness. Social assistance recipients are asked to understand the significance of ‘self-sufficiency’ and to ‘think positive’, ‘look forward’, actively develop, keep up or improve their ‘work ethic’, resist dwelling on experiences of discrimination and get rid of feelings of superiority towards low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Importantly, the case managers have far from stable careers themselves: many of them work on ‘flexible’ contracts, with added insecurities because of political changes and consequent reorganisations in social assistance offices. They therefore share some sense of precariousness with the recipients.

## **Precarious present, optimistic future**

Many interactions between case managers and social assistance recipients

recorded for this research involved an acknowledgement of tough labour market conditions. Case managers often recognised the difficulty of finding durable paid employment in the post-crisis economy. Social assistance recipients in particular (in contrast to those on unemployment benefits who had been employed more recently) were often said to be hard to ‘place’. And social assistance offices had to compete for vacancies with other public and private labour market re-integration services. Due to these conditions, some case managers conveyed how they felt that social assistance recipients should not blame themselves for having to depend on benefits. As one case manager told newly arrived recipients:

“We are all here because we want a job; nobody wants to be on social assistance. We are going to help you, support you in looking, finding a job. It’s really difficult to find a job. Don’t blame yourself if you don’t succeed, the labour market is just really difficult at the moment.”

(General information meeting)

The case managers, however, also made sure to say that social assistance recipients were not to feel hopeless. Structural conditions and pessimistic views were often quickly side-lined in favour of pedagogies of optimism. These consisted of teaching recipients to 1) accept their precarious situation; 2) control impeding thoughts and feelings; and 3) imagine their future.

### **What optimism entails: Accepting, controlling, imagining**

Pedagogies of optimism, it appeared, first involved connecting to the experiences of social assistance recipients. Case managers would lecture on the inevitability of present precariousness, advising recipient to accept it, predominantly with regard to employment contracts: zero hour, part-time and temporary contracts ranging from weeks to months. As one case manager put it during the general information meeting:

“This is 2016, right? It’s not 1991. You cannot switch from one job to another. [In the past] you would get a one-year contract or even a permanent contract. But today, work is flexible, short contracts, no permanent positions. You are just going to have to deal with that.

That's just how it is.”

(General information meeting)

During one of the workshops, another case manager discussed a recipient's refusal to accept a four-week job because it would lead to an insecure situation of having to re-apply for benefits afterwards. This application process entails a 'period of effort' of four weeks in which social assistance recipients have to search for paid employment without receiving social assistance benefits. They have to show they have done their best by filling in a 'plan of effort' on which they record their performed activities supplemented with 'proof' such as job application and rejection letters. In response to the recipient's refusal and considerations, the case manager explained social assistance benefits will be put 'on hold' when recipients find a temporary job (up to four weeks), so that recipients do not have to go through the application process again. In addition, he used the metaphor of a patchwork quilt to explain how the current labour market works:

“You have to imagine the labour market as a patchwork quilt. [This is] for the women, they are usually better with a needle and thread. A patchwork quilt consists of little pieces of fabric, put together with thread. Every little piece of fabric is a job for three months. Yet a smaller piece of fabric is that job for four weeks. A contract for one year is a large piece, you can count yourself lucky if you get that. This is what the labour market looks like. You have to tie all those pieces of fabric together.”

(Workshop)

Besides teaching recipients the inevitability of their situation, this (explicitly gendered) analogy was intended to illustrate how stability and continuity are created by enduring the discontinuities and insecurities of the labour market, with temporary supplementary social assistance benefits. Normalising precarity, the general take away is to accept and deal with the inevitable “cycle of poor jobs – no jobs” (Wiggan, 2015, p. 377), or in the words of yet another case manager: “You can only influence yourself, not everything else.” Following this logic, the second component of pedagogies of optimism is to teach recipients to control impeding thoughts and feelings and to teach them to focus on what they *can* do. The



following excerpt from field notes based on a workshop that just started with a new group, shows how this works (CM is short for Case Manager and R for Recipient):

Everyone is asked to introduce themselves. A social assistance recipient shares his story of leaving his home country due to a war and having suffered severe physical injuries that cause chronic pain, which makes it difficult for him to work. He explains he wants to work, since social assistance benefits are barely sufficient to sustain his family of five children, but that it is extremely difficult for him to find work. With his educational background he only qualifies for manual labour, like warehouse or production work, he says, but that is exactly the kind of work he cannot perform.

The case manager responds by saying it must be difficult for him to live with pain every day. She asks him what kind of work he thinks he is able to do. He says he doesn't know exactly.

CM: "What kinds of jobs interest you?"

R: "It's not a matter of what interests me, I just have to find a job."

CM: "That is what it starts with, right? Knowing what kinds of jobs to apply for, what kinds of jobs you are able to do, considering your limitations."

The social assistance recipient repeats how difficult it is for him to find a job he is able to do and that he really wants to find one, to which the case manager responds she wants to help him find out what the possibilities are for him.

After repeating again a few times during the workshop how difficult it is for him to find paid employment, the case manager responds: "You have a lot of limitations, but you also have a lot of qualities. Start focussing on that, focus on what your qualities are, what you *are* able to do." He nods.

(Workshop)

The case manager gave him an assignment: to make a list of existing, but not necessarily available jobs he would be able to do and qualify for. Through this, the recipient was directed towards 'thinking in possibilities rather than limitations', which is a recurring pedagogy at the social assistance

offices (compare Cromby and Willis, 2013; Friedli and Stearn, 2015).

In contrast to being underqualified, social assistance recipients who are overqualified are seen to impede labour market (re)integration if they have feelings of superiority towards low-skilled or badly paid jobs. During the general information meeting a case manager gave an example of this:

The case manager tells the group of recipients about a criminologist who got a job at a bike and car shop, a lawyer who started working in the catering business and someone who studied Greek and Latin who became a taxi driver.

He adds: “Another recipient used to work as a welder off shore and earned a lot of money. He could get to work as a welder again and would earn just above minimum wage. He said he wouldn’t do it, but he had to, otherwise we will cut off your benefits.”

(General information meeting)

The purpose of this kind of story-telling is to show that finding a way back into the labour market means having to accept undesirable jobs. These kinds of stories are nearly always supplemented by the recurring statement that “work leads to work”, which means that any job is a starting point potentially leading to a better job, a potentiality that being on social assistance does not entail.

Besides being taught to control thoughts and feelings of inferiority and superiority, pedagogies of optimism entail teaching recipients to deal with experiences of discrimination. The following example of a workshop about how to write a CV and letter of motivation illustrates this:

One of the social assistance recipients says he prefers not to put his picture on his CV, because he saw in the news that the chances of getting a job already decrease when your name is not Dutch. Another recipient endorses his stance by saying that she has bad experiences with wearing a headscarf.

The case manager responds by saying he cannot hide his skin colour either and doesn’t want to do that even if he could. “This is who I am, you hire me the way I am”, he says, and tells the social assistance recipients they shouldn’t hide who they are either. “This is what our society looks like. People have to accept you the way you are

and employers have to look beyond your headscarf, skin colour or dreadlocks, because this is the Netherlands.”

The case manager tries to motivate the recipients to keep looking for a job: “Show yourself, it’s the employers’ fault if they are prejudiced. There’s nothing you, as a job seeker, can do about it. But that shouldn’t scare you off.”

(Workshop)

While the case manager acknowledged the experiences of social assistance recipients’ racial discrimination, he responded by encouraging them to continue their search for jobs, because in the end, that is his job. After saying this, he continued with his presentation about writing a CV and letter of motivation. These examples show how social assistance recipients are encouraged to focus on possibilities, rather than on limitations due to being underqualified, physically less abled, overqualified or discriminated against. Moreover, the focus on individual choice is central: you can choose to accept your situation, control obstructing thoughts and feelings and select what to focus on.

Finally, what pedagogies of optimism entail is teaching social assistance recipients to imagine a better future. This is done by talking in terms of hopes, dreams, opportunities and possibilities. Again, this is done by means of exercises: for example, having every recipient state what his or her ‘dream job’ is. This is said to be helpful in order to have a goal to work towards and knowing what ‘realistic job’ would function as a step into the right direction. Thinking in opportunities and possibilities is rewarded, as the following example shows, where a case manager asked a social assistance recipient about the frequency with which she applied for jobs:

The social assistance recipient says she sends out applications three, four or five times a week. She thinks the problem is her age. She is 57 and finds a lot of job openings that are explicitly for young people. She says she feels young, so sometimes she just applies for these jobs anyway. (...)

CM: “You always have so many ideas about what you can do. That is what I like about you, you always think in opportunities and possibilities. It’s a matter of time before you have found the right

opportunity. It'll turn out all right.”

(Workshop)

Since this social assistance recipient is 57 years old and has physical limitations, the case manager cannot offer her anything else except for some words of encouragement. While thinking in opportunities and possibilities is encouraged, resistance is corrected, like in the following example where a job hunter (JH), who is responsible for maintaining relationships with potential employers, explained the importance of having an elevator pitch, to which one of the social assistance recipients responded:

R: “I am 54 years old and have been unemployed for three years. I don't think my elevator pitch matters much.”

JH: “Next to being realistic, you have to stay positive. (...) I notice that there's a lot of negativity with you.”

R: “I am negative because there's no sense of reality here.”

Another social assistance recipient supports him by saying: “I am also 54 years old, I understand your negativity. At some point, it breaks you. You have work experience and now you have to prove yourself all over again. I wouldn't know where I am supposed to get positivity from. I miss attention for that in this group.”

JH: “This is a nice sound, specifically looking for vacancies for older people.”

Another social assistance recipient mentions alternative policy at another municipality where older social assistance recipients are released from the obligation to apply for jobs.

After this remark, the case manager intervenes by saying: “You are all complaining, like: ‘I am too old, I will never find a paid job again’, but if you are over 54 years old, you are subsidisable, have you told employers that? You have to incite employers!”

(Workshop)

The job hunter tries to correct the recipient's “negativity” by means of coming up with a potential – but not actual – solution. When another social assistance recipient suggests an alternative solution, however, the case manager intervenes by mentioning a subsidy employers qualify for

when they hire older social assistance recipients. With this remark, he insinuates that age does not have to be an obstacle, on the contrary, it can be an advantage. It is up to the social assistance recipients to see it like that, as well as to convince employers of it. In general, ‘resistance’ was a recurring theme that case managers would mention and interpret as being ‘negative’ and ‘unproductive’. To ‘get people out of their resistance’, case managers would use ‘soft’ paternalistic pedagogies of optimism, to encourage social assistance recipients to make ‘the right’ choices, or, if that would fail, revert to sanctioning ‘unwilling’ social assistance recipients (compare Whitworth, 2016), leaving no room for experiences of social inequality and acts of resistance (compare Ahmed, 2010; Friedli and Stearn, 2015).

## **Responsibilising, activating and committing through optimism**

Optimism, it became clear during fieldwork, is seen to be an individual duty. Social assistance recipients should ‘keep their negative thoughts to themselves’ and actively work on changing them. The following excerpt shows how this works. During one of the workshops, a case manager invited a recruiter working for a job agency. She visited the group of social assistance recipients to tell them what employers look for in employees and how recipients can find a job. From the field notes:

A social assistance recipient says she is too old. The recruiter replies: “Try to keep the negative away at all times.”

The case manager supplements her by saying: “Keep your impeding thoughts for yourself. Think positive. Not ‘I’m too old’, but what *can* you do?”

The social assistance recipient says she has been applying for jobs in child care for the last year and a half and keeps getting the response that she is too old.

The recruiter replies to her by saying she should keep up her expertise and do volunteer work. “Don’t sit at home with all your negative thoughts. (...) I always say: looking for a job is a fulltime job.”

(Workshop)

This example shows how focussing on possibilities is not just a suggestion, but a moral imperative. Optimism, moreover, entails work. Social assistance recipients have to ‘keep up their expertise, do volunteer work’ and in any case ‘don’t sit at home’, making unemployment ‘productive’ (compare Adkins, 2012). Optimism is seen to be labour (paid by the government) as well as a means to find labour (in the market) and thus a way out of social assistance. Case managers teach social assistance recipients that optimistic people are more successful in the labour market. As one case manager explained:

CM: “The motto is: work leads to work (...) We hope you will keep that dream job in mind and keep applying to it, but you shouldn’t sit and wait for it.”

R: “How many people find a job during this programme?”

CM: “About 25 per cent. And about 25 per cent drops out. People who are really motivated, are able to deal with disappointment, often get rejected but can keep their spirits up, those have the best chances in the labour market.”

(General information meeting)

This example exposes the tensions that are central to the welfare-to-work programmes studied here. The case manager explained that only one fourth of the recipients finds paid employment. Bearing in mind that this group predominantly finds its way into discontinuous, ‘flexible’, low-paid jobs, this does not give much reason for optimism. In addition, there seems to be a discrepancy between the ultimate goal of these programmes – durable labour market participation – and the practices of stimulating recipients to accept any job available. Any form of labour market participation, even in precarious positions, is seen to increase the chances of finding durable work. Moreover, from the perspective of the social assistance office, continuous discontinuous labour is also durable exit out of social assistance. Therefore, once the goal of having paid employment is achieved, optimism has to be cultivated. During an individual conversation with a social assistance recipient who found a job, a case manager explained that being dissatisfied with a certain job means, again, accepting the situation or looking for a better job that does satisfy. Going back on social assistance is not an option:

She tells the social assistance recipient that all of his questions are about employment conditions, that he is not satisfied with those.

CM: “You would really have to look for a job where you do get pension benefits, have a contract for 36 hours a week and 24 days off then (...) But you are coming out of social assistance, all employment is suitable (...) You are actually very lucky with this job. It isn’t routine production work or anything. You have to ask yourself whether you are in the position to demand anything really. You can be dissatisfied with the employment conditions, but that means you would have to find another job with better conditions. Going back on social assistance is not an option.”

(Individual conversation with social assistance recipient)

These examples show the importance and centrality of having paid labour in imaginations of ‘the good life’ in the two Dutch social assistance offices. Social assistance recipients’ situations are not in accordance with this desired life, since both social assistance and insecure, low-paid jobs are not part of the imagination. However, this life is still imagined to be possible for them, although their reality of moving in and out of social assistance and precarious jobs indicates otherwise. In this sense, the optimism citizens are encouraged to develop is cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) indeed: they are asked to desire jobs, careers and futures that may very well turn out to be unattainable. This way, social assistance recipients are “invited, cajoled and sometimes coerced” (Newman and Tonkens, 2011b, p. 9) to become ‘entrepreneurial’, yet ‘docile subjects’ participating in the labour market “in whatever form it is presented to them” (Whitworth, 2016, p. 419) and at the same time aspiring to improve themselves through hard work and optimism.

### **Case managers’ two-sided affective labour**

Importantly, the significance of optimism was apparent not just for recipients, but also for case managers. In many ways, case managers have to perform the affective labour of inciting optimism and creating desires, because they themselves are relatively precarious as well: they are lifting the spirits of the recipients while, or perhaps because, they are upholding their

own. Case managers performed affective labour before, after and during their interactions with social assistance recipients. They experienced employment insecurity due to ‘flexible’ contracts and job insecurity as a result of regular modifications in national and local policy as well as continuous changes within the organisation.

The case managers had many different types of work contracts. While several case managers had been working at the municipality for years or decades even – in a full-time, permanent contract – more recently hired colleagues were full-time self-employed, working on a subcontract agreement or employed part-time by the municipality and part-time (self-)employed elsewhere. Yet others were employed by the municipality in a one-year contract. Some case managers were even former social assistance recipients (compare Schram and Silverman, 2012) or had recently experienced being on benefits due to severe illness. In a sense, the structural position of recipients and case managers looked alike on many counts. This affected daily interactions with social assistance recipients, as the following excerpt from the field notes show:

It is 4 o’clock, which means it’s the end of today’s workshop. The case manager repeats (again) what the purpose of the next meeting will be and what the participants have to do to prepare: bring a vacancy. He asks the group whether there are any questions. One of the participants responds by saying that he wants a permanent contract.

CM: “Who else wants that?”

Several recipients say: “I do.”

CM: “I want that too; I am in a temporary employment contract myself.”

His colleague adds: “A permanent contract is outdated.”

The case manager addresses the first participant again: “I think that everyone here agrees with you, but how is this thought going to help you to find a job? Can we change that? I think you and I cannot change it. I don’t want you all to leave with the thought that there is nothing any of us can do about this, but it is the reality and within that there is still a lot you can do. You do your best and God will do the rest.”

(Workshop)



The case managers have to accept the situation that “a permanent contract is outdated” just as much as the social assistance recipients have to accept it. They, too, have to believe it will work out, that they will find employment at the end of their current labour contract. In order for them to teach optimism, then, they have to first believe in it themselves.

In addition to insecurity about labour contracts, social assistance offices are dependent on local policy decisions, which makes case managers’ jobs insecure (even if their employment is not, see Standing, 2011, pp. 17-18 for the importance of this distinction). While some case managers were confident that they would keep their employment at the municipality, albeit in a different kind of job, others were not as certain, as the following excerpt shows:

One of the case managers tells me the municipal labour market re-integration programme will run as long as the alderman responsible for it is in office. After the next local elections in 2018, the future of this department is uncertain. Consequently, the case managers’ jobs are also uncertain.

One of them says the distance between them and the social assistance recipients is not as big as it may seem: “Before you know it, you are on the other side of the table.”

(During lunch break)

This experienced proximity to social assistance recipients’ situation was a recurring theme. Case managers’ job and employment insecurity was further enhanced because the social assistance office is in constant flux, or, in the words of one of the case managers: “change is the only constant here”. Case managers at both social assistance offices had to change office space during the time I was present, either because a change of scenery was perceived to be good or as a result of a reorganisation in the department that required different spatial organisation. I was told this had happened many times before and that it will happen again. Furthermore, some case managers were given different tasks – to focus on ‘on the job coaching’ or ‘enforcing policy rules’ rather than supporting social assistance recipients to find paid employment, for example. And there were plans to mix teams of case managers for ‘cross-fertilisation’.

Besides these elements of insecurity, case managers experienced

continuous competition due to weekly score updates. In social assistance office 1, all case managers received a weekly email with individual scores on two measures: number of social assistance recipients from their case load who exited social assistance due to having found paid employment and their score from the ‘customer-satisfaction research’ in which social assistance recipients were asked to evaluate their case manager. In office 2, the internal case managers (working for the municipality) had to compete with the external case managers (working for a contracted agency), since they received weekly exit scores on the team level.

As a result of these dimensions of uncertainty, case managers had to do what they would teach the recipients: accept their current situation, think positive and imagine an optimistic future. The following example from the field notes shows this backstage work:

One of the case managers tells me she thinks they might not be necessary in the future, because less social assistance recipients are referred to the labour market re-integration service they offer (in contrast to the services offered by the externally contracted re-integration service). Since she is on a temporary contract, this would probably mean she will lose her job. She explains to me that it would not be a big personal problem, since she is certain she will find another job. Or maybe she will open up a store. That is one of her dreams, to run her own store.

(During lunch break)

In summary, then, these results show the centrality as well as the complexity of optimism in the context of welfare-to-work in times of conditional social assistance and precarious labour markets. Both social assistance recipients and case managers have to accept precariousness (albeit on a significantly different level), think positive and look forward. Moreover, case managers have to practise what they preach in order to be able to do their job.

## Conclusions

Governmental precarisation (Lorey, 2015), we have shown here, entails pedagogies of optimism: through pedagogical state–citizen encounters, positive affect is mobilised in order to produce ‘the right feelings’ and an orientation toward the future which effectively individualises and

normalises precarity and produces labour power for precarious labour markets (compare Wiggan, 2015; Greer, 2016). Failing to perform ‘work-readiness’ by displaying feelings of optimism is seen as a sign of not wanting to exit social assistance, of not trying and therefore of being insufficiently worthy of assistance. In the welfare-to-work programmes studied here, experiences of precarity are counterbalanced by means of teaching recipients to imagine a better future, which revolves around having a better job, or even a ‘dream job’, which ultimately entails a “promise of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010). Since social assistance recipients have little to look back to – either because the past was precarious or because the labour market and their situations have changed – and case managers currently have mostly insecure, low paid jobs to offer, they teach recipients to look forward, towards an imagined future that makes it worthwhile to accept precarious, discontinuous labour in the present. This paradox of social assistance recipients having to accept a precarious situation now in order to not be in a precarious situation later, is central to the pedagogies of optimism and require a lot of work from both social assistance recipients and case managers. Social assistance today, in effect, is thus not so much counterbalancing precarity, but rather offering ways to accept a state of precarity through pedagogies of optimism.

Importantly, these pedagogical encounters involve affective labour from the case managers too: they are to teach social assistance recipients the desired optimism by means of the set-up and decoration of spaces, lecturing, discussing, advising and exciting social assistance recipients, offering them information and assignments, doing exercises and using punitive measures. Given their own precarious labour market position, this proves rather difficult and at the same time essential for them. They have to perform two-sided affective labour: lifting the spirit of social assistance recipients, while upholding their own. Welfare-to-work programmes are therefore best understood as characterised by insecurity and precarisation on both the receiving and the providing end of state-citizen encounters. In fact, we contend that it is in part the precarious position of case managers that can account for their investment in pedagogies of optimism.

In times of austerity and while social assistance is becoming more and more conditional, both social assistance and labour market opportunities

are severely limited. In an important way, optimism as pedagogy is often all that case managers have to offer. Case managers are asked to provide workshops, but are jammed in between the negative affect of recipients and the lack of actual realistic labour market opportunities. Far from being only a rather cynical outcome of responsabilisation and individualisation, then, looking in detail at the actual practices in social assistance offices has enabled us to show how pedagogies of optimism are also, at least in part, the way in which case managers are able to stay hopeful themselves.