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

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Chapter Three: Performances for Upward Mobility

How Dutch welfare-to-work programmes function as temporal spaces of imagination*

Introduction

According to the Dutch prime minister, “hard-working Dutch citizens” are people who strive to “make something of their lives” and should be rewarded for “working hard”. In an interview on public television in 2011, he was asked to explain who he does *not* consider to be ‘hard-working’. In his answer he referred to social assistance recipients. While saying that he does not necessarily blame them for “not working”, he explained they should get a job in order to become part of the group of ‘hardworking Dutch citizens’.¹ The prime minister thus equates ‘hard work’ with earning money in the (labour) market and being independent from social assistance, which is something to strive for. Moreover, his statements reveal a belief in a society in which it is possible to thrive through paid work. The promise is thus that ‘work pays off’ (*werk loont*) – which is actually the name of a municipal welfare-to-work programme in the Netherlands.

While people who ‘work hard’ are believed to be deserving of

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(financial) rewards, those deemed not to be working hard enough (since they need income support) are obliged to do so in what is called ‘welfare-to-work’ or ‘workfare’ programmes (see for example Standing, 1990; Peck and Theodore, 2001; McDowell, 2004; Korteweg, 2006; Paz-Fuchs and Eleveld, 2016). These programmes are aimed at labour market (re) integration and require social assistance recipients to perform all kinds of work – from unpaid and community work to course work – in return for receiving benefits. The Participation Act (that organises social assistance in the Netherlands as of 2015) is an example of this. It states that the right to benefits is conditional on the individual effort to find any kind of ‘generally acceptable’ paid employment as soon as possible. Moreover, to ensure social assistance recipients do their utmost to obtain and retain this kind of employment, the law states that benefits can be cut when social assistance recipients are deemed to “obstruct obtaining, accepting and retaining generally acceptable employment by clothing, a lack of personal grooming or behaviour” (Article 18, paragraph 4g). In addition, social assistance recipients are obliged to participate in ‘labour market (re) integration services’ as offered to them by the municipality they live in. These services are to assist social assistance recipients in their quest for paid work.

The Participation Act is the most recent example of social assistance reform in the Netherlands, that started in the early 1980s. Due to a sharp increase in unemployment rates resulting from the global economic recession, social assistance benefits shifted from being primarily a means to sustain oneself independent from a spouse or relatives, to being a substitute income in times of (long-term) unemployment (Van Berkel, 2017). This marked the beginning of a (still ongoing) debate about the rights and duties of social assistance recipients. Social assistance policy has become increasingly conditional: the right to benefits depends on requirements with regard to social assistance recipients’ aesthetics, affects, behaviour and active participation in welfare-to-work programmes, as well as in society through obligatory ‘volunteering’ (Kampen, 2014; Arts and Van den Berg, 2019; Van den Berg and Arts, 2019). Today, social assistance is not merely seen as a way to provide an income to those in need, but importantly as a way to ‘activate’ social assistance recipients in order for them to become ‘self-reliant’, ‘independent’ from income

support (again).

Although the focus is on job search rather than training, welfare-to-work policies contain pedagogical strategies (Newman, 2010; Arts and Van den Berg, 2019; Van den Berg and Arts, 2019), as the underlying assumption is that social assistance recipients have a gap – in knowledge about the current labour market and personal skills needed to successfully participate in that labour market – that can be filled through performing (unpaid) work and participating in workshops (Gerrard, 2014; Kampen, 2014, compare Cruikshank, 1999). According to Jessica Gerrard (2014), we are witnessing a conflation of a ‘learning ethic’ with a ‘work-ethic’: a commitment to learning and personal development in order to “accrue value upon the self” for and through paid work (Gerrard, 2014, p. 863; compare Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010). Welfare-to-work programmes are thus not merely intended to ‘put social assistance recipients to work’, but also to ‘improve’ them – in terms of their ‘employability’ – in order to increase their chances of successfully participating in post-Fordist labour markets and thereby improving their position in society. In this chapter, I argue that the particular ways in which ‘improvement’ for and through (paid) work takes shape, can be understood as a way of solving the tension between the ideal of paid work and the reality of precarious labour markets.

Work as the promise of upward mobility

Political discourses about work and welfare-to-work policies reveal that work is a “happy object”, in the words of Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 21). It is recognised as a cause of happiness and wellbeing, for both individuals and societies as a whole (Tokumitsu, 2015; Weeks, 2017; Sage, 2019). On the website of the Dutch government one can read that “a job offers people social contacts, self-confidence and the possibility for personal development”.² In addition, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment, recently stated that “paid work is the fastest way to integration and participation in Dutch society”.³ Work is not merely a source of income, but, when linked to social status, seen to be a foundation for usefulness, recognition and belonging (Castel, 1996; Berlant, 2007; Muehlebach, 2011; Tokumitsu, 2015), a means for self-actualisation and

self-improvement (Honneth, 2004; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010), or even “a source of joy in and of itself” (Tokumitsu, 2015, p. 60, compare Weeks, 2017). Work, then, is understood to keep societies together and make life worth living. However, this rhetoric of work as “the promise of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010) is ostensibly at odds with the observed increase in the number of people who have to face precarious employment conditions in contemporary post-Fordist labour markets (Harvey, 1990; Sennett, 1998). Guy Standing (2011) and Mike Savage et al (2015) have even defined a new social group: ‘the precariat’, consisting of individuals working in low-paid, insecure jobs that are “unlikely to assist them to build a desirable identity or a desirable career” (Standing, 2011, p. 27; compare Savage et al, 2015, p. 193; Walkerdine, 2003). For them, paid work does not seem to offer ‘the good life’.

Judith Butler (2004) and Isabell Lorey (2015) describe the current condition in terms of precarity and precarisation. For Butler, it is a “social condition of political life” which is unequally distributed, emanating from “dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting” (cited in Puar et al, 2012, p. 170). Lorey argues that precarisation is a process of normalisation, in which having to struggle in a precarious form of labour is increasingly becoming the norm in formerly well-developed welfare-state-societies (Lorey, 2015). This is, of course, not ‘naturally’ so, but the result of (internationally coordinated) political choices and public policies that have resulted from deindustrialising labour markets and related socio-economic problems, in combination with the dominant belief that neoliberal policies are the best answer to this new order (Standing, 1990; McDowell, 2004; Harvey, 2005). Contemporary politics and policies have contributed to the disappearance and devaluation of certain types of work and related citizenship status and identities, while simultaneously promoting (upward mobility through) labour market participation (Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010; Reay, 2013).

Welfare-to-work policies are exemplary, as they are conditional and based on the premise that if you work hard enough to learn and improve yourself, you can be successful in the labour market, thereby securing your position in society – even if you start at the bottom. While this may have been the case for (some) people (mainly men) in Europe (and beyond) in Fordist times, post-Fordist waged labour does not seem to

offer many people a secure existence, nor an outlook on improving one's condition (Sennett, 1998; McDowell, 2004; Standing, 2011; Savage et al, 2015). Many authors have argued, therefore, that this type of social policy enhances precarity and (re)produces inequality (see for example Wiggan, 2015; Greer, 2016), since welfare-to-work policies require social assistance recipients to accept any possible job and are characterised by “an emphasis on job search (rather than training), conditionality and sanctions (rather than unconditional entitlements)” (Greer, 2016, p. 164). Lorey describes contemporary modes of governing in Europe (and beyond) as ‘governmental precarisation’, because it offers merely a minimum of safeguarding while requiring people to take responsibility for creating the life they desire in the post-Fordist political economy (Lorey, 2015).

Since post-Fordist labour markets offer increasingly ‘flexible’, insecure jobs that require a certain type of labour and relation to that labour, cultivating ‘employability’ has become crucial and very specific. Post-Fordist labour markets require “a worker who is ‘all in’” (Weeks, 2017, p. 52) and is willing to continuously develop one’s character for and through (paid) work (Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010; Gerrard, 2014). Not surprisingly, then, to successfully participate in the current labour market requires continuous ‘self-invention’ (Walkerdine, 2003) or ‘self-work’ (Gerrard, 2014). Especially considering the fact that education does not self-evidently result in having a career, as “linear hierarchies of the education system of the past and jobs for life” have largely been replaced by the need to keep learning constantly and have multiple career trajectories over the course of a lifetime (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 240). Consequently, as Katariina Mäkinen (2016) argues, this ‘self-work’ is not about “accumulating skills or developing abilities” per se, but primarily about developing capacities to be able to anticipate the insecure future, as well as to offer employers ‘flexible’, adaptable, potentially improvable labour power (Mäkinen 2016, pp. 77-78). ‘Self-work’ is thus inherently future-oriented and about potential, both for the individual (in terms of future labour market opportunities) as for the employer (in terms of future market opportunities) (Mäkinen, 2016). As Beverly Skeggs writes, for many, it has become almost impossible to be a ‘subject of value’ in the contemporary precarious labour market that requires people to (be able to) become a “risk-taking, enterprising, mobile, reflexive, individualistic

self”, which “requires access to the right resources” (2004, p. 176, compare Rose, 1999).

Fordist ideals – “the promise of relative economic security and wellbeing, plausible middle-class aspirations, and a sense of linear biographical legibility” (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012, p. 317) – then, seem to be increasingly removed from the reality of people who live in precarious conditions, but are still very much present in contemporary imaginations, hopes and dreams. Several scholars have conceptualised this continued adherence to these ideals as ‘post-Fordist affect’ (Berlant, 2007, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011, Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012). They understand this to be problematic, ‘cruel’ even (Berlant, 2011), because it contributes to the continuation and justification of existing inequalities (Reay, 2013). In this chapter, I examine Dutch ‘labour market (re)integration’ as a case in which the requirement to take care of one’s own improvement and wellbeing through ‘self-work’ and ‘working hard’ in the labour market – and the promises this brings – converges with precarious labour market conditions. This chapter thus goes deeper into the technique of ‘imagining’ that is part of the ‘pedagogies of optimism’ that were described and analysed in chapter 2. Moreover, it shows that the affective labour that social assistance recipients have to perform does not merely consist of thinking and feeling ‘positive’ about their current situation and potential future, but also consists of thinking and feeling certain ways about themselves, their very ‘personality’, learning ways to know themselves (better) in order to (continuously) ‘improve’ themselves for paid work.

Fordist ideals, post-Fordist realities

The primary task of case managers working with ‘work-ready’ social assistance recipients is to assist them in finding waged work in a highly competitive and precarious labour market that offers no (or very limited) career perspectives, while requiring typical post-Fordist employee skills – characterised by paradoxical demands for authenticity and emotional commitment on the one hand and adaptability and flexibility on the other. Most vacancies require a certain educational background that often does not fit the social assistance recipients’. Case managers’ principal

task appeared to be challenging and often even impossible. Within the welfare-to-work programmes, the solution to social assistance recipients' unemployment (or insufficient employment) was sought in pedagogical and psychological interventions aimed at improving their selves (compare McDonald and Marston, 2005). Case managers had to fill several hours of workshops and make these into 'motivating', 'empowering', and, ultimately, 'employability-enhancing' workshops. By means of various exercises, the workshops required continuous 'self-work' (Gerrard, 2014) from social assistance recipients in the hope that it would increase their chances of finding paid employment and, ultimately, having a career. Simultaneously, the unattainability of this ideal was often acknowledged by both case managers and social assistance recipients, based on their knowledge of and experiences with the labour market (also see Arts and Van den Berg, 2019). Thus, the aims and ideals on which the workshops were based did not 'fit' the labour market realities.

In this section, I will first show how Fordist ideals and post-Fordist realities guided the workshops, resulting in the perceived need for social assistance recipients to work on their selves in order to have a chance of attaining the life so much valued: to belong to the group of 'hardworking citizens' and, importantly, to have a chance to further improve their position in society through waged labour. Subsequently, I will examine the techniques used by case managers that were aimed at 'improving' social assistance recipients and their situations: introspection and imitation of labour market situations. These techniques resulted, ultimately, in the requirement for social assistance recipients to give performances of an imaginary potential, yet not actual, post-Fordist worker of valued, secured status with possibilities for upward mobility. The deployment of these techniques can be seen as an attempt to solve the conflict resulting from adhering to Fordist ideals in the context of post-Fordist realities.

The promise of upward mobility through paid work

A central part of 'labour market (re)integration' is the reproduction of the ideal of paid work as the primary way to achieve something in life, be a valuable member of society and have a decent subsistence – things social assistance benefits cannot provide – as the following example shows:

During the first meeting with the group of social assistance recipients, the case manager starts by saying: “You have applied for social assistance benefits. (...) You have not succeeded (in finding paid employment), that is why you are here. We are here to assist you in finding paid employment. (...) You have to keep trying. It is your life, your existence and you are responsible for what your life is like. (...) If you are on social assistance, you are in fact dependent. It is barely enough to pay your bills and doesn’t leave much room for other things. That’s why it is important to find a job again. It gives you a reason to get up from the couch, the feeling to belong again, the feeling to live again.”

Most of the social assistance recipients expressed their desire to have a paid job (again). Mainly for financial reasons and to “be independent” or “free” (from social assistance), but also to be able to “participate in society”, to “(re)gain self-confidence”, or more generally to “matter”. However, some (predominantly older) social assistance recipients would state that paid work is not “beatific” (*zaligmakend*), as they believed there are other ways to have a meaningful life as well – through volunteering and caring for others, for example. Still, the goal of welfare-to-work programmes (finding paid work) and what achieving that goal would yield (a better life), appeared to be fairly uncontested,⁴ but the ways in which this goal should be achieved, as well as the feasibility of it, were not that self-evident. Case managers offered a wide range of assistance: giving advice, transferring knowledge, providing spaces for social assistance recipients to practice and offering an indirect line to employers – through intermediaries such as job hunters, account managers and recruiters. The conditions under which case managers had to provide these services, however, often presented them with difficulties.

Firstly, they were not able to offer schooling, since budgets for this were practically non-existent – except for small amounts (usually up to 500 euros) for certificates, but this was not necessarily encouraged and often only allowed on the condition that an employer had announced the intent to hire the social assistance recipient once a specific certificate was obtained. This led to many tensions, as some case manager were very cautious to provide support for training outside the workshops they offered themselves, while social assistance recipients, on the other hand, would see it as the primary, or even only way to be able to advance in the

labour market. This became apparent during the following interaction between a social assistance recipient and his case manager:

The social assistance recipient tells the case manager what kind of a job he is looking for: working in manufacturing or [industrial] cleaning. But that requires a certain [safety and health] certificate. He asks if it is possible to acquire that with [financial] support from the social assistance office.

CM: “You can get a cleaning job where such a certificate is not required, right?”

R: “But I would like to go a step up.”

CM: “It is not about what you want. Fun, better, nice, those are very lovely words, but that is for later. First, you have to get out of social assistance.”

The social assistance recipient says he indeed wants to find a job as quickly as possible, he adds: “If I get a job, I will be free.”

The case manager acknowledged the social assistance recipient’s desire to “go a step up”, but believed that to be an issue for the future, implying that it is possible to move up from a cleaning job for which no educational qualifications are required. In other cases, obtaining certificates was encouraged (and paid for), as many case managers believed that it (slightly) increases people’s chances to find paid employment, and, importantly, the chance to get a good job and possibly even a career. However, given the limitations with regard to schooling opportunities, social assistance recipients were primarily encouraged to climb the career ladder through work. Accordingly, case managers would teach them to distinguish between a ‘bread job’ and a ‘dream job’. The latter is a job to keep in mind, even to visualise on a mood board, while the former is the first step into the direction of acquiring that dream job. Social assistance recipients were thus encouraged to find a job, any job, as soon as possible and to work one’s way up from there. As one case manager explained to me:

“The workshops are aimed at helping people to have a clear picture of their bread job, that is to say, a job they can obtain in the short-term. This has to be a realistic job and realistic means that there are vacancies available for it. The bread job is opposed to the dream job: a job that

people work towards. Not from being on social assistance, but from a bread job.”

During one of the workshops, another case manager explained the same idea to a social assistance recipient:

CM: “It is our goal here to get you to your dream job, but not directly. As an intermediate step, we help you to get a bread job.”

R: “But I am afraid I will get stuck in a job like that and never move forward.”

CM: “A bread job is in any case better than being on social assistance.”

These examples show how the ideal of upward mobility was maintained while, at the same time, it was acknowledged that, for social assistance recipients, this ideal might not be feasible in the short term, or maybe ever. Still, paid work was deemed “better than being on social assistance” because it would offer a daily routine, social contacts, more money and, in theory at least, the chance of improving one’s condition.

Besides a lack of opportunities for schooling, another rather crucial problem for case managers was the severely limited amount of appropriate vacancies for the recipients to apply to. Finding paid employment appeared to be very difficult, especially for social assistance recipients, since they often lacked the required educational background and/or job experience, or because they were deemed too old according to employers. The social assistance recipients who were able to find paid employment, would almost always be hired in temporary, ‘flexible’ or zero-hour contracts. One case manager, therefore, gave a social assistance recipient who obtained a temporary employment contract some words of encouragement: “Go and work really hard, so that they never want to lose you!”

During my presence at the social assistance offices, I observed that the support case managers could offer mostly did not result in social assistance recipients finding paid employment or even being invited for a job interview, especially not for a durable job with career prospects.⁵ To make their own working life bearable, case managers had to find ways to contribute to social assistance recipients’ quest for a job, as well

as to keep believing they could actually do so. They did so by means of encouraging them(selves) to optimistically persist (see Arts and Van den Berg, 2019) and helping recipients to improve themselves according to the (perceived) requirements of potential employers. As the next paragraph will show, the focus during the workshops was mainly on exercises of introspection – to ‘know’ or ‘(re)discover’ oneself – in order to find work that would fit their personality or to learn to adjust their personality to fit a job (compare Honneth, 2004; Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010; Mäkinen, 2016). These exercises of introspection were followed by imitations of meetings with network contacts and potential employers, where social assistance recipients would practice to ‘sell’ oneself. These exercises were not merely intended to help social assistance recipients to find a job now, but, importantly, to learn ways to move up in the labour market later.

Performances for upward mobility: Introspection and imitation

The workshops mainly revolved around answering the questions: “Who am I? What do I want? What am I capable of?”, as well as practicing job interviews with potential employers and giving short presentations (called the ‘elevator pitch’) for hypothetical network contacts. Case managers would explain to social assistance recipients that ‘knowing who you are’ and ‘being able to communicate that’ is crucial in order to get a good job. This way, it was believed, social assistance recipients learn to ‘discover’ their potential and bring it into being (Mäkinen, 2016, p. 80). Consequently, case managers encouraged social assistance recipients to incorporate a ‘personal profile’ in their CV: a short text in which they would describe their ‘personality’. To help them write this, case managers handed out questionnaires, personality tests and/or lists of qualities to choose from:

CM: “I will give you a form with questions you can answer. It helps you to determine your strong qualities. It includes questions like: what kind of father, mother or partner are you?”

R: “Isn’t that private?”

CM: “Well, if you beat your wife, you shouldn’t say it, that’s private. But it is about who you are as a person. Like ‘I am someone who always tells the truth’, but it is also about: what kind of people annoy you? (...) [With the personal profile] you indicate

what you are good at, what your qualities are, but also who you are. (...) You can get that from the test. (...) What matters in the end is, do I grant (*gunnen*) you the job or not. The employer has to choose between people with similar work experiences and educational backgrounds. And then he asks himself: ‘do I want you here, do you have to offer me something?’ That has everything to do with presentation and personality.”

This quote explicitly states the core of the workshops: personality and presentation. It also shows the work that goes into ‘knowing oneself’ and ‘knowing’ the boundary between ‘private’ and ‘professional’. Many social assistance recipients strictly separated the two, while case managers encouraged them to involve their private self into their (search for) paid work. As this example painfully shows, according to the case managers, almost nothing was considered too private, except if it would deter employers (one can only speculate why the case manager would choose precisely this example to make that clear). As Skeggs has argued, who one can (say to) be depends on one’s position in society (Skeggs, 2004). She points to the long history of poor people having to “tell themselves” in ways that are expected from them in order to receive income support, thereby lacking “the option of being public or private” (Ibid, p. 134). As this example shows, for those who desperately need a job, keeping certain things private is either not an option, or essential – with regard to things that others (in this case employers) might perceive to be less valuable or worthy. Social assistance recipients are, thus, forced to know and tell themselves “in ways not of their own making” (Ibid), as the following example will also illustrate. It shows a frequently occurring exercise that case managers used to ‘help’ social assistance recipients increase their ‘self-insight’:

The case manager suggests to have everyone state their pitfalls.
One of the social assistance recipients says he doesn’t know what his pitfalls are.

The case manager asks him: “If you are at home with your wife, does she like everything about you or does she whine about you?”
Others start laughing a bit.

R: "Yes, she whines about me sometimes."

CM: "Can you give me an example?"

R: "When I am too strict for the kids."

CM: "That is about your children. Does she like everything about you or do you have attributes she doesn't appreciate?"

The social assistance recipient thinks for a while. The case manager asks the other participants.

The next (male) social assistance recipient says he doesn't know his pitfalls either and another male social assistance recipient says his memory is not that good, so he can't recall his pitfalls. The female social assistance recipients, however, do not seem to have a problem with the exercise. The first woman says her pitfall is that she is too compliant and has to learn to say no. The second female social assistance recipient says she can be a control freak. Both women give examples of situations in which their pitfalls have played a part.

The case manager compliments both women by saying they have described their pitfalls very well. She explains to the group why an employer would ask about their pitfalls: "It says something about your self-insight, it shows that you know who you are. And the trick is to be able to turn your pitfall around into a quality."

She gives the group of social assistance recipients an assignment for next week: "Come up with two pitfalls and ways to turn them around into something positive."

This example shows in greater detail what 'self-insight' entails and that not all 'self-insight' and personal attributes are deemed valuable. Legitimated by 'knowing what employers look for', case managers convey 'knowledge' about what social assistance recipients should know about themselves and, once they know, what they should do with that knowledge: turn 'negative' characteristics, or 'pitfalls', into 'something positive'. Often, exercises were accompanied by lists of character traits that were categorised into 'positive' traits – such as 'autonomous', 'composed', 'spontaneous' – and 'negative' ones – 'intractable', 'impersonal' and 'fickle', for example. Social assistance recipients were taught to perform 'self-work' in order to develop what were perceived to be objectively designated positive personal characteristics.

As Skeggs (2004) and Walkerdine (2003) have argued, we should not

only question the value of ‘self-insight’ itself – and the particular ways in which this should be obtained and articulated – but also scrutinise the specific characteristics that are deemed to be ‘good’ and ‘valuable’. The workshops showed that self-insight (being able to give the right words to the right character traits) was valued as opposed to ‘not knowing’ or not being able to articulate them. In addition, the character traits that were deemed valuable, were understood to be necessary to be successful, making these kinds of exercises examples of ways in which social assistance recipients are to become a “subject of value” as “deemed necessary by global economic rhetoric” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 176). Moreover, this example shows that it seemed to be easier for the women in the workshop to articulate their ‘pitfalls’. This gendered dimension, however important, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that Walkerdine points to a ‘feminisation’ of the discourse of the self, as “the values of a psychology and interiority” that have usually been ascribed to women, have become central (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 242). This might explain what I have observed here.

In addition to introspection, an important part of the workshops revolved around social assistance recipients continuously having to practice interacting with an imagined other who could possibly give them a job. During many workshops, meetings with employers or network contacts were imitated, so that social assistance recipients could perform their ‘improved self’ in a hypothetical job interview or ‘elevator pitch’. The latter was a short presentation in which all the knowledge and skills social assistance recipients had obtained during the workshops had to come together. Social assistance recipients had to practice their pitch over and over again, to make sure they could present themselves properly when the time would come that they would meet someone who could get them a (better) job. This is how a case manager explained the content and purpose of an elevator pitch to a group of social assistance recipients:

“[The elevator pitch] is a short encounter. Imagine that you run into your boss in the elevator. You are on your way to the first floor and your boss is going to the hundredth floor. You want to go higher up as well, so you have to sell yourself in thirty seconds. We are going to practice that.”

As this quote shows, the elevator pitch is, quite literally, about upward mobility. To be able to present oneself in such a way that ‘you sell yourself’ was not only considered necessary for social assistance recipients to get a job now, but also to move up from there later – as the concepts ‘bread job’ and ‘dream job’ also show. The following example shows how practicing the pitch during the workshops worked:

CM: “Shall we start?”

R: “Can I read my pitch out loud?”

CM: “It is about your personal presentation, conveying your personal character, making contact. You can keep your notes with you, in case you don’t know what to say, but try to speak from yourself.”

The social assistance recipient reads her pitch from the piece of paper in her hand. When she is finished, the case manager gives her feedback.

CM: “It is not really spoken language, but more like written language. The content is good, but if you tell it instead of reading it, you might use other words. I do see you have implemented the suggestions I gave you last week. That is good to see. Do you want to try it again, this time from yourself?”

R: “Not right now, I will try again next week.”

CM: “Very well, just keep practicing.”

This continuous performing during the workshops, without anyone present who could possibly get them a job, often resulted into social assistance recipients’ frustration. To prepare for one of the workshops, which was about how to dress properly, social assistance recipients were instructed to dress *as if* they were going to a job interview. During the workshop, the case manager explained that the social assistance recipients should actually always come to the social assistance office dressed like this, in case a potential employer would visit and because it would help them to ‘get into the work-mode’ (see Van den Berg and Arts, 2019). A social assistance recipient responded to this by saying:

“I will go to a job interview looking like this [wearing a suit], but I will not come to the social assistance office dressed like this. (...) You are not going to give me a job, so I won’t put up a show here. (...) I am

bothered too much with all this. I do not agree that we should dress neatly when we come here. I have never seen an employer here.”

In order to make the performances more real, case managers would regularly invite job hunters, account managers (AM) and recruiters from employment agencies to the workshops to function as potential employers, as in the following example:

CM: “Today, we are accompanied by an account manager from the Employers Service Centre. She has a large network of employers. That is why we have given you the assignment to prepare your elevator pitch.”

Before the social assistance recipients start with their pitches, the case manager asks the account manager whether she wants to say something.

AM: “I am in contact with employers on a daily basis and I want to try to start you in the right direction. I will not look at you as a trainer or coach, but as a future employer. Do you fit me, or the vacancy? And what do you have to offer as a colleague? What makes you stand out from the rest? This is the way you would view a product you want to buy, right? That tube of toothpaste or a bicycle.”

The analogy with selling and buying a product was a recurring one, as social assistance recipients were taught to think of themselves as being entrepreneurial and making themselves ‘valuable’ in the market (compare Rose, 1999; Skeggs, 2004), commodifying not only their labour power, but their whole selves (Tokumitsu, 2015; Weeks, 2017, compare Lorey, 2015). Though, according to many case managers, money shouldn’t be the primary motivation for wanting to work. Asking about salary, for example, was said to be ‘not done’. As Savage et al argue, this type of reasoning is mainly adhered to by those who can afford it (2015, p. 62) and is in line with the dominant ideology that work should be done out of love (Tokumitsu, 2015; Weeks, 2017).

Performing the elevator pitch in front of someone who was “in contact with” actual employers was a frequently occurring practice during workshops. The intermediary would give feedback on the content as

well as the form of the pitch – the way a social assistance recipient would use his body and make eye contact, for example. In addition, she would give social assistance recipients general, and sometimes more concrete, suggestions for jobs to apply to – in care, retail, cleaning, call centres and catering, for example. It was, however, not the intermediaries' task to help social assistance recipients to get a job, nor did case managers expect this from them. This way, the performances remained a matter of form, not functioning as an actual activity in (proximity of) the labour market, but performed within the boundaries of the social assistance office.

At another workshop series (specifically for 'higher educated' social assistance recipients), the case managers had not invited intermediaries to the social assistance office, but had arranged – together with a local organisation aimed at enhancing 'corporate social and environmental responsibility' – for the group of social assistance recipients to visit a company in the city's business district. During one of the workshops at the social assistance office, this upcoming event was imitated in order to prepare for it. The case managers explained that the meeting was set up so that HR-Managers from several businesses (law firms, consultancy firms, IT companies, banks, real-estate offices) could give the social assistance recipients feedback on their elevator pitch and help them to think of ways to get a job. The case managers also told the social assistance recipients not to expect too much: they would not get a job out of the meeting, but they would get valuable feedback and maybe even a network contact. Moreover, they said, it always remained to be seen who actually shows up, since "these are very busy people". During the actual meeting that took place in a conference room on the 17th floor of an impressive building in the business district, the social assistance recipients performed their elevator pitch one by one in front of the mood board they had made prior to the meeting (in order to visualise their personality and aims in life). The audience consisted predominantly of the same intermediaries that regularly visited the workshops at the social assistance offices.

During the following workshop at the social assistance office some recipients expressed their disappointment with the lack of representatives from the business district, as well as the lack of actual results of the meeting. One of the social assistance recipients said he thought the meeting was a "deflation", as he didn't even get useful feedback, let alone a

lead to a job. He felt like a “charity project” which didn’t result in the social assistance recipients meeting actual employers. Therefore, it didn’t meet his expectations, even though the case managers had already told them not to expect too much. Other, though not all, social assistance recipients said they agreed with him. One of them told the case managers she talked to one of the very few representatives from the business district and asked her if she could introduce her to some of her contacts in the district. She declined and explained that she did not have that type of relationships with the other businesses. Thus, although the meeting brought the social assistance recipients physically close to, or even in the work place, it did not bring them closer to paid work. Instead, as with all the observed ‘imitation’ exercises, it merely offered social assistance recipients a space to “perform, and imagine through that performance, themselves otherwise” (Dawney, 2011, p. 537), that is, being a potential employee rather than a social assistance recipient.

Conclusions

The observed workshops in the three municipal social assistance offices entail ‘self-work’ intended to ‘improve’ social assistance recipients (through introspection, telling and performing themselves in certain ways) and thereby their condition (through paid work). The workshops offer social assistance recipients temporary spaces in which they can perform (and imagine through that performance) becoming and being an employee – by means of imitating (closeness to) paid work. These observed practices can be understood as resulting from several aspects coming together in welfare-to-work policy practices. First, the promise of paid work as a way to improve individual wellbeing: “a reason to get up from the couch, the feeling to belong again, the feeling to live again”, as one case manager articulated it. Second, welfare-to-work policy that obliges social assistance recipients to become ‘employable’ in order to ‘(re)integrate’ into a labour market that mainly requires ‘flexible’, adaptable, continuously self-improving employees that ‘fit’ the job (in terms of their ‘personality’). Last, the tension of adherence to (Fordist) ideals of upward mobility through paid employment in a time when the (post-Fordist) labour market barely offers ways to have a career. Especially for people who are over fifty years

old, have little formal education and/or the required work experience – as is the case for many of the social assistance recipients I encountered.

The welfare-to-work programmes I have studied are, then, best understood as a governmental strategy that mobilises “powerful affective attachments” (Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012, p. 317) to Fordist notions of economic security, social belonging and upward mobility through waged labour. These ideals have become practically unfeasible for certain populations in post-Fordism, yet are mobilised by the state exactly for them, because they are not (yet) deemed to be ‘subjects of value’ (Skeggs, 2004). As this chapter has shown, this is done in the form of exercises in which social assistance recipients learn to give certain performances that are (perceived to be) required in post-Fordist labour markets. By means of these exercises, case managers encourage social assistance recipients to change themselves into a ‘subject of value’ (Skeggs, 2004) for the labour market without being able to ensure ways to actually obtain a secure position through durable waged labour with career perspectives. These performances, thus, function as ways to approximate Fordist forms of economic security, social status and belonging.

This way, social assistance recipients are continuously performing a potentiality: someone yet to be and something yet to come. Or, in the words of Lauren Berlant, they “perform not the achieved materiality of a better life but the approximate feeling of belonging to a world that doesn’t yet exist reliably” (Berlant, 2007, p. 277). Welfare-to-work is thus premised on the potential of social assistance recipients to become employees, as well as the potential that paid work will provide them economic security and status – something social assistance does not offer (anymore). However, for many people, and especially social assistance recipients, it is highly unlikely that this potentiality becomes a reality, as the labour market primarily offers them precarious positions. Through welfare-to-work, then, governments contribute to upholding promises that cannot be redeemed for increasingly more members of their population, while simultaneously normalising their current precarious conditions (compare Lorey, 2015). These findings bring about important questions as to why so many people are invested in welfare-to-work policies and the promise of the attainability of ‘the good life’ through paid work.⁶