

When benefits become barriers. The significance of welfare services on transition into employment in Norway¹

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Abstract

Historically, many individuals with disabilities in Norway faced exclusion from participation in mainstream society. A shift in disability policy from an emphasis on segregation to integration started taking place in the late 1960s, and “full participation and equality” became the overall objective from the early 1980s. In parallel, the government has developed and implemented several welfare services and programs to enhance this integration, particularly in the labor market. Based on in-depth interviews with persons with mobility disabilities, the article addresses their experiences of transitioning into mainstream employment, supported by, and navigating through a vast array of welfare services. Born in the 1970s and early 1980s, these study participants represent so-to-speak the first generation of integrated people with disabilities. Their stories are important when exploring how and to what extent the policy of integration enhanced labor market participation. Applying a structural perspective, the article discusses why welfare service delivery processes may become barriers along the road into mainstream employment. Informed by Fraser’s (2003) “perspectival dualism,” it outlines how insufficient dimensions of redistribution and recognition impede a smooth transition into working life for persons with mobility disabilities, turning welfare services and programs into barriers.

Introduction

The conceptualization of disability in Norwegian public policy has changed dramatically since the late 1960s, when public policymakers started acknowledging their responsibility to integrate people with disabilities into mainstream society (Grue, 2004; NOU, 2001). In the early phase however, disability was understood primarily in terms of an individual’s incapability to participate in society (St.meld.nr. 88 (1966–1967)). During the 1970s, disability policy incorporated environmental and societal factors into the conceptualization of disability (St.meld. nr. 23 (1977–1978)) giving rise to a relational perspective. The notion of disability as a disparity between the demands of society/surroundings and the individual’s abilities (St.meld. nr. 34 (1996–1997)) was further emphasized in the 1990s. Following the United Nations’ International Year of Disabled People in 1981, disability policy discourse embraced full participation and equality for people with disabilities as its ultimate objective (Grue, 2004).

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In parallel with this change, increased government funded efforts were implemented since the late 1960s to integrate persons with disabilities into society, particularly in the labor market (Grue, 2006; NOU, 2001). The purpose of integration was two-fold: to enhance “social integration” of persons with disabilities into society in the sense that he/she should be able to live as if he/she did not have a disability, and to mainstream all welfare services through “organizational integration” (Seip, 1994, p.249). Some countries, like the US and the UK, have chosen an antidiscriminatory approach manifested in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the British Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. Norway, one of the Nordic welfare states where the government provides basic welfare services to implement employment and disability policy (Kaoutto et al., 1999), has until recently used redistributive measures rather than legislative ones² to level the playing field for persons with disabilities. This has been in part a function of the prevalent idea in Norway that specific legislation for single groups might have a stigmatizing effect.

For several decades, Norwegian social policy has focused on the “working line” reinforced in the Governmental White Paper in the early 1990s (St.meld.nr.39 (1991–1992)), which prioritizes employment over reliance on social security benefits (Hatland, 2001). Upholding the working line as the driving force in social policy, employment is viewed as the most compelling indicator of integration in society (NOU, 1992). Faced with a steady increase in disability pension recipients, the government has developed and implemented a vast array of employment measures to enhance labor market participation and support the working line. Norway spends comparatively more on labor market schemes intended to integrate people in the active labor force than other OECD countries – 14% of disability related expenditure is allocated to these measures (OECD, 2003). The government has also developed several services, like personal and functional assistance, to further boost independence and employment opportunities for people with disabilities (the overview of relevant Norwegian welfare arrangements). It reemphasized the working line by establishing “One stop shops” in 2006, to provide more coordinated employment-related services to the public, and improve assistance to vulnerable groups (St.prp. nr.46 (2004–2005); St.meld. nr.9 (2006–2007)).

Despite advances in the theorization of disability and increased government funded efforts to bridge the employment gap, a large number of persons with disabilities still remain outside the workforce, a well-documented reality in most European countries (Shima et al., 2008). In Norway, employment statistics show that while an estimated 77% of the general population is gainfully employed, only 45% of persons with disabilities are participating in the labor market (AKU, 2008). These figures represent a continual challenge to policymakers and highlight the need for modifications and improvements in the policies, systems, and programs set up to promote labor market participation.

Researchers embarked on this qualitative, explorative study to learn from the stories of people with mobility disabilities who are gainfully employed. The aim was to identify facilitators and barriers in their successful transition into employment³. Guided by a life-

² Although the Government has stressed redistribution, it introduced a recent change in policy when launching a Discrimination and Accessibility Act in 2008 that will come into force January 1st 2009.

³ This study, which is part of the larger research project “User, citizen, and barriers,” is funded by the Research Council of Norway and was conducted by Svein Mossige and Janikke Solstad Vedeler, both affiliated with NOVA, Norwegian Social Research.

span perspective, the study used in-person interviews to address 15 interviewees' stories on experiences of childhood, schooling, education, the job seeking process, and welfare services. The study offers insight into the study participants' navigation of the roads into employment within the context of the Norwegian society. The participants were born in the 1970s and 1980s when disability policy had imbibed the integration approach. Hence in a way, the interviewees represent the first generation of integrated people with disabilities.

In a previous article, three primary narratives on roads into mainstream employment were identified⁴. Narratives or life stories can “offer a window – though not a perfectly transparent one – on historical periods, cultural practices, and psychic events” (Peacock & Holland, 1993, p.374). The examination of the stories was informed by principles of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). One third of the participants shared experiences of a more or less “straightforward” road from education into employment⁵. Although these participants met obstacles along the road they were manageable and everyone got a job matching their competence upon graduation. A second group experienced a “supported” road as their job seeking process was facilitated by external sources of support, such as participation in vocational rehabilitation programs. The remaining five participants recounted a bumpy or “barrier-prone” road into employment, where barriers threatened to obstruct their progression to employment. These participants (referred to as barrier-prone participants in this article) faced obstacles primarily with welfare service delivery processes. The structural barriers of welfare service delivery processes were either passive, like when welfare service providers⁶ only offered disability pension as the most likely future option for participants, or active such as the lack of accessibility.

All the three narratives shared some common facilitators for a successful transition into employment: supportive parents, higher education, and the determination to become a part of the workforce. These personal factors resonate well with findings in other studies (Anvik, 2006; Bliksvær & Hansen, 2006; Grue, 2001; Horvath-Rose, Stapleton, & O'Day, 2004; Pascall & Hendey, 2004). The analysis did not find a significant impact of gender or severity of disability on the interviewees' experiences. Nevertheless, literature shows these factors can contribute to participants' perceptions of themselves and others' attitudes towards disability or gender (Barron, 1997, for a discussion on gender).

The purpose of this article is to examine the barrier-prone narratives in-depth and outline why the same services that the government initially introduced to facilitate participation instead posed barriers. Exploring this narrative may elucidate in part why the employment rate among people with disabilities is low. Although these participants secured jobs at the end, their transition could have been interrupted at several instances causing them to

⁴ Vedeler, J., & Mossige, S. (to be published). Pathways to labor market participation. The Narratives of Persons with Mobility Disabilities on Transitioning into Mainstream Employment. Submitted to Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, September 2008.

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⁶ The article uses welfare service providers as a general term, denoting personnel in the welfare apparatus. The concept of case worker is also applied, but then in a more narrow sense when referring to staff in public employment services or in national health insurance agencies.

become young disability pension recipients. While a few studies have addressed how persons with disabilities themselves perceive welfare services, e.g., the studies by Anvik (2006), Barron (1997, 1995), and Grue (2001) on transition issues related to adulthood, this paper seeks to advance the discussion on why benefits become barriers through a social justice approach informed by Nancy Fraser's (2003) "perspectival dualism". Fraser's theory is highly applicable as the participants' challenges essentially involve struggles with equal participation in society. Applying her concepts can help to decipher the dimensions of maldistribution and misrecognition that may impede a smooth transition into employment.

The study

With the assistance of a large disability organization, the researchers sent letters to its members in the eastern part of Norway. Altogether, 15 participants, seven men and eight women between the ages of 24 and 43 (median age = 33), were self-recruited to the study in the fall of 2006 and spring of 2007. They replied positively to recruitment letters or advertisements on disability organizations' websites.

Ten were born with impairments while one acquired impairment in early childhood and four in their teens or early twenties. Most of the participants used wheelchairs and some could walk without assistance but said they had mobility impairment. All were to some extent in need of different assistive aids. Some participants required help in their daily life for personal or home care assistance. Nine participants live alone, five live with a cohabitant or spouse, and one lives with her parents. Five have children, of which two are single mothers.

Five have completed upper secondary education; two in general education and three in vocational training. Seven hold a bachelor's degree and three a master's degree. A third got their jobs through standard application procedures while two-thirds entered the labor market after having participated in vocational rehabilitation programs. All except one were in permanent positions. Seven worked full-time, the rest part-time. The respondents were employed in a wide range of occupations in the public and private sector. Five received graded disability pension while working part time.

Given the limited knowledge on barriers and facilitators in employment transition for persons with disabilities, the study had an explorative character and was not carried out with any particular hypotheses in mind (Thagaard, 2002). In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants' narratives on experiences and perceptions of their road into working life. It applied a life-span approach to examine their career development as a life-long process, and enquired about participants' experiences of childhood, family, schooling, education, welfare services, and employment (for an extensive description of the methodology please see the reference quoted in note 6⁷). The two researchers conducting the interviews together, encouraged participants to give their own accounts of what was important rather than imposing an agenda through pre-determined questions. Individuals construct and express the meanings of happenings within a life-span in the form of stories or narratives which can be effectively tapped

⁷ Vedeler, J., & Mossige, S. (to be published). Pathways to labor market participation. The Narratives of Persons with Mobility Disabilities on Transitioning into Mainstream Employment. Submitted to *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, September 2008.

through unstructured interviews. Researchers paid close attention to the interpretations, experiences, and events recounted by the informant and actively gathered the data in concert with the interviewee (Charmaz, 2006).

A framework for understanding impediments to social justice

Defending the importance of critical theory (Geuss, 1981, p.2)⁸ in identifying, examining, and conceptualizing existing tensions within temporary society, Fraser has developed a comprehensive, normative framework of “perspectival dualism” (ibid, 2003, p.63) to explore socio-theoretical issues of subordination. Perspectival dualism entails the necessity of viewing every practice in terms of both redistribution and recognition, as well as examining how these are entwined. For Fraser, redistribution and recognition represent the two most important types of social orderings in a complex society. She ties redistribution to the economic sphere while recognition is linked to the cultural sphere. Redistribution pertains to goods and burdens and is linked to the notion of social class, as it pertains to the distribution of material resources such as welfare services and access to paid work. The concept of recognition is best understood through its antonym, misrecognition (Dahl, 2004). Misrecognition occurs when one is being “denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of *institutionalized* patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem” (Fraser, 2000, p.114 – emphasis added).

According to Fraser, the ultimate aim of society should be to provide for participatory parity, which means that social arrangements must “permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 2003, p.36). When people lack the opportunity to participate in society on a par with others, the underlying causes for their subordination can be grasped by examining the dimensions of redistribution and recognition. She argues that most subordinate groups experience a two-sided oppression because they lack the economic resources to participate in society on a par with others and suffer from institutionalized misrecognition.

Fraser uses gender and race to illustrate her theory. An example is the denial of gay marriage. When people are denied access to this institution, they are subject to both issues of misrecognition – love between same-sex couples is devalued institutionally – as well as maldistribution – as the institution of marriage makes available redistributive measures, e.g., old age pensions and inheritance. This paper argues that her conceptualizations are also highly applicable for the field of disability. The participants’ accounts speak of struggles with receiving the supports necessary for their road into employment and with issues of recognition, such as being treated as individuals with abilities to participate in society. Informed by Fraser’s analytical concepts, redistribution is operationalized by equating it to access to welfare services and programs needed to facilitate employment for people with disabilities. These services are often significant preconditions for their prospects of becoming and staying employed. The dimension of recognition includes the eligibility criteria to these services as well as the participants’ narratives on encounters with welfare service agencies and providers. Participants frequently interpret welfare service encounters to be reflective of actual disability policy practice.

⁸ In brief, critical theory “is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation”.

Fraser's theoretical and political aspiration of creating a dual model of social justice applicable within philosophy, social, and political science is ambitious and controversial. While some recognize her work as valuable (Dahl, 2004), her theory is also disputed. By proposing the concept of perspectival dualism, Fraser tries to transcend the culture–economy divide she claims is greatly, although unfortunately, present in most critical theory of this time. Presenting the criticism only in brief here, one of her primary critics Honneth (2004, 2003a, 2003b) argues that recognition does in fact underpin both redistributive and culturally oriented claims of social struggle. To him, recognition lies at the heart of social justice (Honneth, 2004). He further questions why Fraser sustains the economic and the cultural as the primary dimensions of her socio-theoretical framework; he asks rhetorically why not moral and legislative dimensions, for instance (Honneth, 2003a, p.156). These objections are important. This paper nevertheless considers Fraser's concept of perspectival dualism to be a suitable framework because it offers the analytical concepts needed to examine how both economic and cultural dimensions in society work separately and together. Informed by her approach, the paper elucidates what could be the structural challenges to a smooth rendering of welfare services and thereby the account sheds light on what could be impediments to participatory parity for the group in question.

The meaning of welfare services for the road into employment

As stated above, this paper will concentrate on the experiences of participants narrating a barrier-prone road into the workforce. These stories offer valuable insight into how services can become obstacles due to roadblocks created by the “service delivery process.” The term service delivery process is borrowed from Scheer et al., 2003. In their study on the experiences of persons with disabilities with health care services in the US, they describe it to be “related to the way that providers deliver services” (ibid, p.223). They offer the lack of provider knowledge and lack of timeliness of services (i.e., the delay in provision of services) as examples of service delivery process barriers, both of which apply in this case. This analysis reveals that the lack of coordination among welfare service agencies is also a welfare service delivery process barrier.

The interviewee Anne's⁹ story is used to illustrate how struggles with support services impact a person's prospects of labor market participation. A life span approach was used in the interviews, addressing the different transitions from school to higher education and from higher education into employment. Her life is presented in a chronological manner, emphasizing the different transitions but also underscoring the coherent struggles with welfare service delivery. Anne's story is chosen because of its richness in introducing how the three aspects of welfare service delivery processes become barriers. The story resonates with the four other barrier-prone stories as well and, additionally, these observations are similar to findings in other Norwegian studies (Anvik, 2006; Grue, 2001). Presented here as a case study, Anne's story implies some generalizations since case studies often tend to reflect wide-ranging lessons about the targeted issue (Stake, 1995; Weiss, 1994). Her life story is not taken as a mirror of any external reality. It nevertheless offers a window on the interplay between an individual and the larger structural, social, and cultural world. Anne's story elucidates how welfare service delivery

⁹ Anne is not the person's real name and measures, such as not stating her diagnosis and birth place, have been undertaken to ensure her anonymity.

processes interact with a person's life creating road-blocks for a smooth transition into employment. Anne was born in the mid 1970s when integration had become an explicit objective of disability policy following the mainstreaming of disability welfare services into the general social welfare apparatus (NOU, 2001). She was born with a progressive disease which was diagnosed at the age of seven. From about the same age, the disease started to affect her mobility capability and was using a power wheelchair at the time of the interview. Anne grew up as an only child surrounded by an extended family in a small town in Norway. Her father is an engineer and her mother has upper secondary education. They established and ran a tourist enterprise in which Anne got involved at an early age

Schooling

Anne entered the mainstream educational system as a first grader. The Education Act of 1969, with amendments in 1975, ended the earlier segregation of children with disabilities in school who were admitted on equal terms with others in the educational system (Grue, 2001). This happened in parallel with the closure of special educational institutions (except the schools for students with deafness and hearing impairments). Despite the emphasis on organizational integration, lack of accessibility posed great challenges to Anne's social interaction with peers. She was teased all through elementary and secondary school, for instance when she was not able to enter the school bus any other way than crawling up the bus stairs. Anne states, "I originated from a small municipality with lack of knowledge of, or interest in accommodation." She ties her experiences of being different to the lack of provider knowledge about the need for accessibility in the school buses and buildings, along with inadequate financial resources. Her interactions with her supportive parents and relatives, as well as in her early advocacy work in disability organizations confirm the contrasting reality that she was a capable person with competences in many fields of interest.

Early welfare service encounters

At the age of 11, Anne was in need of a wheelchair in order to enhance her mobility. When Anne and her parents applied for a wheelchair, they received assistance from welfare providers in the municipality. In Norway, technical aids are free of charge. Anne and other participants, however, emphasized the lack of timeliness of these services. The casework process often takes very long. Anne waited two years for her first wheelchair. When the wheelchair finally arrived, she had outgrown it.

When she was 16 years old, welfare service providers suggested that she apply for a disability pension. Under the National Insurance Act, an individual with a severe disability may be entitled to a disability pension immediately upon completion of upper secondary education. The pension is granted when there is no prospect of improvement in work capacity in the short or long term, and mostly to persons with developmental disabilities (Norwegian Directorate for Health & Social Affairs, 2006). The offering came as a surprise to the family as neither Anne nor her parents had applied for a disability pension. In her own interpretation of the "offering", Anne relates it to the municipality's plans of building a residence for persons with cognitive disabilities: "I think their intention was to fill the house with residents, because the more people with disabilities they got there, the more money they would receive from the government." Anne refers here to the deinstitutionalization reform, which took place in the first half of the 1990s. The Norwegian State Housing Bank funded the building of community owned residences.

Due to Anne's physical impairment, welfare service providers may have thought there would be no prospect of work capacity for her. The disability pension would provide her at least a basic level of economic income. However, to Anne it represented just another barrier to her societal participation and she states, "I was furious (. . .) It was very offensive not only to receive an offer, but also to have a solution forced upon you." The disability pension offer demonstrated for Anne again the lack of knowledge among welfare service providers, in the sense that "the person is not perceived – or treated – as a fully competent person" (Scheer et al., 2003, p.227).

Higher education

It took some time for Anne to decide what career path she wanted to follow. After active and goal-oriented research on feasible fields, she decided on a career in economics. Just before completion of her studies, she fell seriously ill and was hospitalized for several months. She received a rehabilitation allowance from the former Public Employment Services, now part of the new Labor and Welfare Administration (see below), while studying. Rehabilitation allowances are payable to those "who due to illness, injury or disability" are in need of financial support to enhance future employment opportunities (cf. Rundskriv om yrkesrettet attføring, 2005). Entitlement to these benefits is medically based and involves a functional capacity assessment by the municipal health service (Grue, 2006). Due to her hospitalization, the Public Employment Services withdrew her payment. Her serious illness may have contributed to the Public Employment Service's assessment that the probability of Anne's entry into the workforce was rather small and it would be better to spend the benefit on other consumers. Anne says the Public Employment Services did not believe she would complete her education and therefore wanted her to apply for a disability pension, representing another instance of lack of provider knowledge. The withdrawal caused great economic challenges for Anne who relied on the benefits to pay her rent and other bills while hospitalized. She managed to complete her economics degree with financial support from her parents.

The job seeking process

Anne was unemployed for a year after completing her degree. She applied for several vacant posts and was called for some job interviews but never offered a position. In some interviews, she felt they were assessing her competence in the subject matter, while in others she felt her disability becoming an issue. In all job talks, Anne addressed her disability while stressing that as long as she had a computer and the opportunity to use functional assistance, she had the necessary knowledge and willpower required for the position. Nonetheless, potential employers sometimes worried about the workplace being inaccessible for her, as well as her ability to perform her tasks. While she found these attitudes condescending, it was difficult to assess if these attitudes were the main reason why she never got a job offer.

After a while, Anne decided to join a supported employment scheme she had heard about through her advocacy work in disability organizations. Supported employment is one of many governmental selective schemes available for persons with disabilities with the purpose of facilitating labor market participation (Regulations concerning Labour Market Schemes, 2005, Section 6). A local Labor and Welfare Administration office conducts these programs in cooperation with enterprises and organizations. Anne moved to another

city to participate in this scheme. She started the two-year on-the-job training program in a private enterprise. She was very satisfied with the training because it addressed her opportunities and abilities as a potential employee rather than her limitations. The training eventually gave her a salaried administrative position matching her interest and competence.

At the start of the on-the-job training, Anne again faced lack of cooperation from agencies making her participation challenging. Anne is in need of personal assistance due to her disability's impact on muscular functions. She started using this service from the age of 18, to enhance her independence. In many respects, personal assistance represents substantial independence for the individual as it paves the way for consumer participation in organizing one's activities of daily living (Grue, 2004). The municipality offers the service. Moving between municipalities to participate in the supported employment scheme posed challenges in receiving appropriate services in time as the new municipality had to make a decision to render the service. It took six months to reach a decision and for Anne's assistants to be in place. Meanwhile, she had to receive personal assistance from her mother who lives in her hometown, miles away from where Anne is currently residing. In response to how she feels about receiving such support, she says, "What I, in my thirties, feel about having to ask my mother, who's in her seventies, to help me in the morning, and having to be here 24/7? Intensely frustrating!"

Moving from one place to another also caused problems with accessible apartments. In Norway, the technical aids center provides support in making apartments accessible. The application procedure often takes a long time, and it took seven months to get an automatic door opener installed. Anne was not able to enter or leave her apartment by herself without one and hence was fully dependent on others.

Furthermore, the absence of assigned functional assistance during the supported employment program threatened Anne's participation. The functional assistant helps with personal and work-related tasks (Helle & Widding, 2000). The employer initially covers the cost of functional assistance. Then the technical aids center reimburses these expenses. Thus the precondition for receiving functional assistance, aside from having a medically assessed need, is an existing employer–employee relationship. Such a relationship does not exist when taking part in a labor market program since the Labor and Welfare Administration is in charge of the participant and not the enterprise assisting with the training. The technical aids center denied the functional assistance because Anne was not in an employer–employee relationship. In order to participate in the supported employment scheme, Anne had to make use of her own personal assistants during the on-the-job training. She then got in trouble with the municipality for the "excess consumption of personal assistants." As soon as Anne was in a salaried position, the functional assistance was in place as well.

Road-blocks to labor market participation

To Anne, a job means the opportunity of making use of her competence and creativity. Her road into working life has however been very barrier-prone. Summing up her successful transition into employment, Anne highlights the lack of coordination in the welfare service apparatus and its impact on her journey:

“The set of rules, not all but many are made with a particular frame in mind. If you happen to fall just outside one frame and the next one does not overlap, you are caught in between. And that’s where I’ve been several times since I have moved from one municipality to another, from one county to another. (...) What is needed is awareness raising in that people with disabilities are just as different as people in general. One needs to focus on the person’s needs and not try to get everyone into the same grain silo. (...) Someone has to change the set of rules in order to put in place a functional assistance arrangement that works, even if you are participating in a labor market scheme. For instance, as a newly educated it could have been of interest to be affiliated with a temporary staff recruitment agency. But if I was not holding a salaried position, I would not receive functional assistance. And if I do not get any work experience, I will not get a salaried position. (...) It’s just a series of crossroads where everyone practices a duty to yield for everyone else and no one makes the first move.”

Why do benefits become barriers?

Research indicates at least two possible explanations of why the Norwegian disability policy has failed in closing the employment gap for people with disabilities: (1) its one-sided emphasis in trying to fit a person in working life without transforming environmental conditions (Anvik, Olsen, Lien, Sollund and Hansen, 2007; Grue, 2006); and (2) the limited enforcement of employers’ obligation to employ and retain persons with disabilities in the workforce (Fossestøl & Widding, 2007; Hvinden, 2004). These responses are persuasive, as disability policy has primarily focused on the supply-side of the employment equation, without addressing the employers’ responsibilities or undertaking extensive efforts to make society accessible. At the same time, the barrier-prone narrative highlights challenges with welfare service delivery processes. The following outlines why welfare services may become barriers to employment participation. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to draw a new disability policy approach, the aim is to delineate some of the dimensions that may be hindrances to the realization of the disability policy’s objective of full participation and equality.

Participatory parity

The government started in the late 1960s to focus on social and organizational integration of persons with disabilities. Since 1981, it has aimed at full participation and equality, denoting a more inclusive approach. Current disability policy is thus in line with Fraser’s participatory parity and compatible with the main concept of the United Nation’s Standard Rule: “equalization of opportunities” (United Nations, 1993). Norway has endorsed the United Nation’s Standard Rules and committed to support these rules morally and politically (St.meld. nr. 8 (1998–1999); Grue, 2004). “Equalization of opportunities” is defined as, the process through which the various systems of society and the environment, such as services, activities, information and documentation, are made available to all, particularly to persons with disabilities. (...) Persons with disabilities are members of society and have the right to remain within their local communities. They should receive the support they need within the ordinary structures of education, health, employment and social services (United Nations, 1993).

Employment is one of the 13 target areas for equal participation (the others are accessibility, education, income maintenance and social security, family life and personal

integrity, culture, recreation and sports, and religion). Equal participation in employment emphasizes the rights of persons with disabilities to take part in society on a par with others and the government's responsibility to provide the necessary services needed for such participation. The Government has mainstreamed as well as developed and implemented welfare services and programs to foster full participation and equality. These are often prerequisites for participation in society and the labor market.

Even so, the story of Anne reveals that many of the redistributive goods have been extremely difficult to access and obtain in time. She has experienced welfare service delivery process barriers with respect to lack of (1) provider knowledge, (2) timeliness of services, and (3) coordination among service agencies. Why does this service delivery process present road-blocks in the transition into employment? Guided by Fraser's perspectival dualism, the following sections will address this question from a redistributive and a recognition perspective.

Issues of redistribution

Most welfare services stem from different pieces of legislation, as sketched in the overview of relevant Norwegian welfare arrangements. Until the recent establishment of the Labor and Welfare Administration, different welfare agencies were responsible for these services. Since multiple agencies provided various services required for labor market participation, job seekers like Anne often had to multitask. In encounters with employers, Anne had to justify being as competent as other job seekers with the necessary qualifications and skills. Anne had to work with different welfare agencies to receive necessary services and make certain she received them in time. Her story reveals the potential vulnerability when in need of several services – unavailability of necessary services at the right time seriously complicated the process of being employed. The government recognizes that persons with disabilities may rely on a wide range of services from different agencies to live an independent life. Nevertheless, in the process of obtaining these redistributive goods, Anne often found herself in the gap between non overlapping systems and services. Caught in between fragmented pieces of legislation and services and without a central entity or agency to reach out to, Anne struggled to stay afloat and had to rely on her mother's help. At least twice during her lifespan, she could have surrendered to the receipt of passive benefits.

None of the barrier-prone or other study participants asked for services or programs that are not currently available, except for perhaps improved transportation¹⁰. Their stories disclose satisfaction to some extent with the existing array of welfare services and programs. However, the main challenge is in the access to, and the rendition of these services.

The welfare service delivery processes needed to support the overall objective of moving people into the workforce may not be working as intended. Participants' stories speak to a potential mismatch between the working line and the policies of full participation and equality. Although many welfare services are available on paper, one may question

¹⁰ Of the 15 participants, two relied on supported transportation, and they acknowledged that the service they received was adequate. The others owned adapted vehicles.

whether their redistribution in practice has taken place to the extent needed to facilitate employment opportunities.

The Government recently launched a large-scale reform of the welfare apparatus recognizing the profound need for more coordinated services¹¹. The resulting Labor and Welfare Administration merges the Public Employment Services (national), the National Insurance Services (national), and the municipal social assistance services. By 2009, all municipalities will have this kind of “One stop shop” in place. The Government initiated this comprehensive reform due to the welfare administration’s failure in moving more people from social benefits into employment (St.prp. nr. 46 (2004–2005)).

Due to the merger of three very important agencies, individuals in need of several services now need to meet with only one provider. Although no comprehensive evaluation of the consumers’ satisfaction is yet available, a study of the few municipalities originally implementing this new welfare model observed that youth and consumers in need of coordinated services were more satisfied compared to those in the other municipalities (Møller, 2006). Despite the promising potential of coordinated services, an important question lingers: Will these one-stop centers reinforce and bring forward the implementation of the working line? *Furthermore*, an obvious disadvantage of the reform is its lack of attention to the redistribution of services due to existing selective programs. Although Norway is a universal welfare state, many of the services for people with disabilities are selective, i.e. access to these rest upon an eligibility criterion (Anvik et al., 2007). In order to investigate obstacles to participatory parity, both from the redistributive and recognition standpoints of perspectival dualism, the subsequent section delineates the problem of misrecognition that may result from selective programs.

Issues of misrecognition

The eligibility criteria for almost all services Anne has needed require medical assessments. Persons with disabilities must undergo a functional capacity assessment to apply for services and programs. This medical assessment is carried out by the health agency in the municipality before the application procedure is handled by caseworkers in welfare service agencies. These caseworkers have to make balanced decisions, using their discretionary power, on how to allocate resources that are often scarce (Kjølsrød, 2005). The discretion and subjectivity of caseworkers may explain why participants encountered differing levels of hindrances in the welfare apparatus.

Fraser notes that means-tested benefits often “tend to stigmatize the recipients, casting them as deviants” (2003, p.65). Even in the Nordic welfare states with universal arrangements, in the case of selective programs, the government has to sort out the needy group and assess the extent of support, with the unfortunate consequence of stamping the beneficiaries as socially inferior (Rothstein, 2001, p.225). Another unfavorable effect of medical eligibility criteria is their sustenance of the underlying notion of personal incapacity (Grue, 2004). An institutionalized notion of disability as infirmity may thus be preserved and embedded in the welfare service apparatus. This notion of disability differs greatly from the emerging policy discourse framing disability as a relational phenomenon,

¹¹ The study participants’ experiences refer to the time period prior to the onset of the reform.

created at the intersection of a person's requirements and environmental and societal factors (cf. *St.meld. nr. 34 (1996–1997)*).

Anne's experience with disability pension could be a prevailing conceptualization of disability as a medical condition. Ignoring what she believed to be in her best interest, welfare service providers twice recommended a disability pension. Anne interpreted this as lack of provider knowledge since she actually wanted support to facilitate future employment. To her, these encounters reveal that she was misrecognized as incapable of active participation in society.

The young adults narrating a barrier-prone road into employment perceive the offers of disability pension as a conceivable alternative to employment in terms of both maldistribution and misrecognition. Bodies such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (*OECD, 2003*) have also commented upon this form of maldistribution. Even though Norway is spending most on active labor market measures, only 14% of disability related expenditure is allocated to these measures; the rest is spent on passive benefits. This method of distributing services and benefits impedes a smooth transition into employment.

This last statement does not mean that all the 30,000 individuals below the age of 40 (*Grue, 2006, p.114*) who receive a disability pension must rather be employed. The disability pension scheme was introduced with the purpose of securing an income for those who have lost or face a permanent reduction of their earning ability due to illness, injury, or disability (*Lov om folketrygd, 2008, Section 12.1*). Many disability pension recipients may not have a work capacity and therefore the pension is an important economic support. However, the barrier-prone participants experienced a welfare service system that very often recognizes them only as passive partners in society. Instead of trying to render available support to become and stay employed, the welfare service apparatus makes disability pension an option.

Entwined impediments to participatory parity

For the interviewees, participating in society through gainful employment was not merely a matter of living the "good life" (*Honneth, 2003a, p.114*). Instead, they narrated their struggles with participatory parity. Growing up when policy recognized people with disabilities as full and equal partners, they all had employment aspirations. However, their road to employment made it evident that some of them faced great challenges in receiving the services needed to become equal partners in society.

The preceding sections have elucidated how these impediments to participatory parity relate to both lack of coordination in the redistribution of services and misrecognition as expressed in entitlement procedures and welfare encounters. They have illustrated how imensions of maldistribution and misrecognition are entwined in the implementation of disability policy.

As in many European countries, the Norwegian disability policy has developed through a "piecemeal approach" (*Drake, 1999*). The government has responded to the objective of full participation and equality "on an *ad hoc* basis by supplying specific services, aids or equipment intended to adapt (rehabilitate) disabled people to life in the community" (*ibid*,

p.40 – emphasis in original) without significantly altering their social and physical environment. These policies are, as Fraser denotes, affirmative rather than transformative. The first type of political strategies “aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them”, whereas the latter “aim to correct unjust outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (Fraser, 2003, p.74).

A partial understanding of the mismatch between objectives and implementation of disability policy in the barrier-prone narrative are in the remedies employed by the government. In response to national and international demands for a more inclusive disability policy, the government set forth an objective of full participation and equality to transform society in order to make it a place for everyone, regardless of their physiological make-up. Additionally, the concept of inclusion is in accordance with the relational understanding of disability. In contrast, the notion of integration refers to a practice where individuals are made to fit into the existing unaltered society (NOU, 2001). In the execution of the policy, remedies based on the latter notion meet the objective of full participation and equality. When applied to redress maldistribution, these affirmative strategies may “provoke a backlash of misrecognition” (Fraser, 2003, p.76) in the sense that they leave society both culturally and structurally intact while implementing programs that mark people with disabilities as different and needy. “In such cases, affirmative approaches not only fail to redress maldistribution; they also intensify misrecognition” (ibid, p.77).

Limitations of the study

This analysis of impediments to participatory parity in the rendition of disability services has its obvious limitations. First, the sample size is small. Without attempting to generalize the findings, the previous discussion has tried to tie the narratives of the barrier-prone participants to more general issues facing other people as well. While many of these narratives resonate well with other studies (Anvik, 2006; Grue, 2004), a larger and more comprehensive study should explore if these experiences are widespread. Secondly, this study addresses the stories of people with disabilities. This was a conscious and professional delimitation, but it would be beneficial to explore this issue through a triangulation of perspectives. This could involve an examination of how the distribution of welfare services, incorporating recognition, are perceived by the consumers and the welfare service providers as well as including a discourse analysis of the current disability policy.

Closing remarks

The narratives of the barrier-prone participants illuminate the continuing disparity in the labor market participation of persons with and without disabilities and the fact that there is still a long way to go in closing this gap. This paper, embedding the story of Anne within broader historical, social, and cultural contexts of Norwegian society, illustrates how she has experienced welfare services initially developed to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Investigating barriers to labor market participation from a structural perspective, the paper has identified welfare service delivery processes as a major barrier for a smooth transition into mainstream employment using personal accounts.

Informed by Fraser's framework of perspectival dualism, the paper has explored and discussed why welfare service delivery processes may pose impediments to labor market participation. Fraser's approach has previously inspired examinations of obstacles to participatory parity within the area of gender and race/ethnicity. Fraser's analytical framework, wherein every practice should be examined from a redistributive and a recognition perspective, is applicable to the field of disability and employment as well. Guided by her analytical framework, the paper has indicated a potential mismatch between the objective of full participation and equality and the lack of transformative policy measures implemented in practice, as well as a mismatch between the prevailing notion of the relational model of disability in theory and its translation into real world deliverables. These conditions created road-blocks to a smooth transition into working life for the barrier-prone participants. A major challenge lies in making the welfare services more easily accessible to those who rely on them to facilitate employment. The interviewees stressed the need for extensive improvement in the execution of these processes. They would have benefited from a policy that not only imbibed full participation and equality, but also made resources available to support their aspirations of obtaining work.

Appendix A. Overview of relevant Norwegian welfare arrangements

Individuals with disabilities are entitled to a number of welfare services and programs. The following, in alphabetical order, are a few of the legislations and services addressed in the article.

Adaptations at college and university

The responsibility rests upon the institutions.

Assistive aids for higher education

Financial supports for assistive aids clearly connected with the disability and regarded as important for completing the studies, are available under the national insurance scheme. Legal basis: The National Insurance Act.

Disability pension

Payable to all persons between the ages of 16 and 67 with a permanently reduced capacity for work as a result of sickness, injury or incapacity, regulated in the National Insurance Act. A person whose work capacity is partially reduced can receive a graded disability pension corresponding to the lost earning ability (Lov om folketrygd, Section 12-11). The disability pension is administered locally by a national agency – previously the National Insurance agency, now the new Labor and Welfare Administration.

Education

According to the Education Act, the National Insurance Act, and the Planning and Building Act, students have the right to an adapted school setting, i.e., receiving appropriate assistive aids and attending an adapted school building and outside areas.

Functional assistance

Employees with severe mobility disabilities can be supported by a functional assistant, performing a mixture of person-related and work-related tasks (Helle & Widding, 2000). The purpose of the service is to enable persons with mobility disabilities “and persons

with multiple disabilities to obtain or keep normal jobs” (ibid:1). From 1997 to 2000, a few municipalities tested out the arrangement of functional assistance. Later it became part of the services offered by the technical aids centers.

Labor market measures

According to the Regulations concerning Labor Market Schemes, the purpose of these measures is to contribute to: strengthening participants’ competence and capacity for work; increasing the participants’ prospects for ordinary work; acquiring qualified labor; preventing and mitigating the damaging effects of unemployment; preventing the exclusion of employees at risk of relegation from working life (Section 1-1). While most of the schemes are available for unemployed persons in general, some target individuals with occupational disabilities “whose capacity for incomegenerating work has been reduced, or whose prospects for choosing work or a job have been significantly diminished. This might be due to illness, injury or disability, or social maladjustment” (Section 1-2). The measures are administered locally by a national agency – previously the Public Employment Services, now the new Labor and Welfare Administration.

National Insurance Scheme

A mandatory insurance and pension scheme that applies to all Norwegian citizens. The National Insurance Scheme provides economic support for sickness, pregnancy and childbirth, unemployment, aging, disability etc. The scheme also covers expenses related to rehabilitation and vocational rehabilitation programs. The National Insurance Scheme was introduced through the National Insurance Act of 1967.

Personal assistance

An alternative arrangement for persons with severe disabilities for practical and personal assistance in daily life, both in the home and outside the home. The service is granted at municipality level with legal basis in the Social Services Act, Section 4-2. The service is consumer driven; the consumer has the prime responsibility towards his/her assistants, can hire their own assistants, decide what tasks they should carry out, and their work schedule.

Rehabilitation allowance

Payable to those who, as a result of illness, injury or incapacity, have a permanently reduced capacity for work or are significantly restricted in their choice of work or place of employment. Higher education may be taken as part of vocational rehabilitation and thus rehabilitation allowance may be granted. The rehabilitation allowance was introduced in 1960 and incorporated in the National Insurance Act in 1967. It is administered locally by a national agency – previously the Public Employment Services, now the new Labor and Welfare Administration.

Social Services Act

Regulates the different socio-political objectives of the social services provided by the municipality. The Act mandates the municipality to provide for certain services, but the individual citizen does not have an automatic, unconditional right to these. The social service agency can decide the form of the service, but the consumer has the right to participation. One of the Act’s objectives is to assist individuals with disabilities “to live and reside independently and achieve an active, meaningful existence in community with others” (Section 1-1 – the author’s translation).

Technical aids centers

There is one such center in every county with the purpose of providing proper, high quality services to people with disabilities, in compliance with their rights according to the National Insurance Act. Individuals with permanent disabilities have a right to assistive aids whenever they are required to become or stay employed, improve their capacity in everyday life, or be cared for at home. The technical aids centers lend out the aids free of charge. The National Insurance Act regulates the technical aids centers.

Working Environment Act

Prohibits discrimination based on disability in the Labor market (Chapter 13, Section 13-1). It furthermore requires that all work places should be accessible for people with disabilities (Chapter 4, Section 4-1 and Section 4-6).

Main sources: "Children and young Individuals with disabilities - what are the family's rights?" (The Norwegian Directorate for Health & Social Affairs, 2006) and the websites <http://www.nav.no>, <http://www.nhf.no>, and <http://www.ssb.no>.

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