Received: 18 December 2018 | Revised: 27 June 2019 | Accepted: 10 July 2019

DOI: 10.1111/spol.12540

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

Motivating the unemployed: A full-range model of motivational strategies that caseworkers use to activate clients

Jolien Grandia[1] | **Yvonne M. La Grouw**[2] | **Peter M. Kruyen**[3]

[1]Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

[2]Department of Social Sciences, VU Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[3]Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Jolien Grandia, Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50 Mandeville Building. Rotterdam 3000 DR, The Netherlands.
Email: grandia@essb.eur.nl

Abstract

Governments use activation policies to stimulate unemployed citizens in finding work. Caseworkers are, as front-line workers, responsible for concrete activation trajectories based on these activation policies. Little is known about how caseworkers try to get clients to participate in these activation trajectories. In a qualitative, inductive study (consisting of observations and reflective interviews) in two welfare agencies, we identified 10 motivational strategies that caseworkers employed. The full-range leadership model appeared to be an appropriate perspective to understand, systematize, and reflect on these strategies, in particular as our analyses show that these motivational strategies can be placed on a continuum ranging from laissez-faire to transactional and transformational strategies. We found that caseworkers matched their motivational strategy to the situation and client but preferred transformational strategies. Our findings implicate chances but also challenges for activation in practice and literature on front-line workers.

KEYWORDS

activation, client interaction, front-line workers, leadership styles, motivational strategies, observational study

1 | INTRODUCTION

Welfare states try to encourage unemployed citizens to become economically self-sufficient through labour market activation policies (Considine, Nguyen, & O'Sullivan, 2018; Rice, 2013; Van Berkel & Borghi, 2007). Activation policies emphasize individual obligations in return for welfare benefits (Senghaas, Freier, & Kupka, 2018). Caseworkers—in Dutch known as "*klantmanagers*"—play an important role in these policies, as they are responsible for making decisions about clients' activation trajectories. That is, they have to decide—with a certain degree of autonomy—which client gets which activation treatment under which conditions (Van Berkel, Van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010; Van der Aa, 2012).

Previous research has shown that caseworkers, like other front-line workers (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), have different perspectives on their work and clients, which, in turn, affects their decisions made (Eikenaar, Rijk, & Meershoek, 2016; McDonald & Marston, 2008; Solvang, 2017; Van Parys & Struyven, 2018). For example, Solvang (2017) distinguished two perspectives on activation: "needs-orientation" and "employability enhancement." Caseworkers holding the former perspective focused on improving clients' self-efficacy, whereas caseworkers holding the latter approach focused on improving the clients' skills and knowledge.

Studies on the different perspectives of caseworkers informs us about their drivers and what they want to improve in their clients, but this provides no information into *how* they try to achieve this. Indeed, various studies call for more research on these interactions to better understand how street-level bureaucrats use their discretion in practice (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Van Parys & Struyven, 2018; Winter, 1999). Sainsbury (2008) explained that front-line workers, such as caseworkers, have to combine and reconcile supportive and coercive elements in their interaction with clients (Sainsbury, 2008), but this distinction remains very coarse and provides no insight into how this is translated in practice. Hence, the goal of this research is to systematically analyse *how* caseworkers interact with their clients to understand how activation is performed to obtain systematic knowledge of the behaviour of front-line workers in interacting with citizens in the implementation of policies.

An inductive research design suits our research goal, because it allows for reasoning from detailed, specific practices to more general insights. In contrast to previous research, in which surveys, semistructured interviews, documents, or focus groups were the main method of data about perceived caseworkers' behaviour collection (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002; McDonald & Marston, 2008), we collected data via direct observations supplemented with open, reflective interviews. This allowed us to document and analyse real-life interactions between caseworkers and clients' first-hand, rather than perceived (inter)actions (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). Because attitude and action are not necessarily consistent, observing practice is a more valid method to study practices than self-report methods (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

The remainder of this article is presented as follows. Given the inductive nature of our research, we first present our research method. Next, we will present our findings. That is, we analyse how caseworkers interact with their clients illustrated by our data. In particular, we show that we identified 10 motivational strategies caseworkers employed and discuss how the full-range leadership model (FRLM in short; Bass, 1999) appeared to be an appropriate model to help us understand, systematize, and reflect on these motivational strategies. The article is concluded with a discussion of the implications of our findings for further research on front-line workers' behaviour and the implementation of activation policies.

2 | METHOD

An inductive, qualitative study was conducted in two welfare agencies in the Netherlands in two middle-sized cities. We generated first-hand, field-based observations and experiences through participant observation and reflective interviews (Ybema et al., 2009), to shed new light on caseworkers' behaviour. To be open for new insights, we did not use a theoretical framework beforehand and only focused on meticulously capturing what was said and done during activation work in practice.

On four different locations, the second author observed 21 caseworkers during their normal work activities, which included intake sessions, follow-up sessions, workshops, and disciplinary sessions, as well as during preparations, administrative tasks, and informal conversations with colleagues and clients in between meetings. Directly after the observations, the second author held short interviews to elicit the caseworkers' reflections on the observed caseworker–client interaction. The combination of “live” event descriptions and caseworker's reflections allowed us to gain insight into the behaviour displayed by the caseworkers. More than 60 different interactions (e.g., an intake session) between a caseworker and a client were observed first-hand.[1] See Table 1 for more information about the data sources. The observations and reflective interviews were conducted in February, March, and June of 2016.

TABLE 1 Data sources and data

Data sources	Resulting data
82 client interactions between caseworker and a client[a]	Extensive field notes
56 clients at social service location A	
14 clients at social service location B	
12 clients at social service location C	
Observed in:	
23 one-on-one client meetings	
12 intake meeting	
10 follow-up meeting	
1 disciplinary meeting	
6 group trainings/workshops	
20 short semistructured interviews with caseworkers[b] after client interaction(s)	Extensive field notes
10 at social service location A	
7 at social service location B	
4 at social service location C	
20 full days of observation on sites	Extensive field notes
Numerous informal conversations, mainly before and after client interactions	
12 observations of administration and organization practices by caseworkers	
1 caseworkers team meeting	
	Field notes together comprised 52.830 words:
	17.153 for location A
	14.746 for location B
	21.931 for location C

[a]Caseworkers were observed 1 to 3 days; sometimes, one caseworker per day, and sometimes several caseworkers on the same day.
[b]Characteristics of the included caseworkers: 18 female and 2 male. Age varied from late 20s to early 60s; majority of the participants' age was 30–40 years. The majority of the caseworkers who were below 40 years old had a higher educational degree in social–judicial services or human resources or have a university degree in public administration. Caseworkers above 40 often had schooling in coaching or conversation techniques or did not have an educational background directly related to their work.

The third and second authors arranged full access to the field by contacting social services' managers and asking for approval to conduct the observations. In the field, the second author renegotiated access with every individual caseworker (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) by discussing during which working days or activities she was allowed to participate and to what extent she would be involved in the client interaction. The second author adopted a role as "observer-as-participant" (Gold, 1957). This means that she was open about her role as a researcher to the caseworkers and clients, informing them she wanted to learn more about the practice of activation and ensuring anonymity and informed consent. The second author limited her involvement in the caseworker–client interaction as much as possible, in order to gather naturally occurring data by making detailed descriptions of "live" events. All observed (and interviewed) caseworkers and observed clients gave explicit verbal consent for participation in this research. Given the limited scope of the research as well as the design and subject of the research, it was not necessary (according to the universities' rules and regulations) to seek and gain permission from an ethics board. The research was conducted in compliance with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice.

No notes were taken during the observations, because both the caseworkers and clients would feel as if they were being assessed, which could create distrust. Taking notes during the observation could thus disturb the natural order of the caseworker–client interaction (Atkinson, 1997). During breaks in the working day of the caseworkers, the second author made as much field notes as possible. During the reflective interviews, she did take field notes and noted quotes of the caseworkers. In this more formal research setting, it was appropriate to make notes without disturbing the behaviour of the caseworker (Boeije, 2009).

The field notes of the observations and reflections, as well as the quotes, were written up in detailed observation logs (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The observation logs were set up in two columns, in which the left column presented the observed concrete practices and literal quotes (Spradley, 1980), from the reflective interviews, and the right column presented the second author's initial interpretations of the practices and reflections. This division was used to create a clear distinction between facts that can be directly obtained through the senses (e.g., number of persons and colour of clothes) and experiential aspects (e.g., misunderstanding and disappointment; Boeije, 2009).

The observation logs were subsequently analysed via open, axial, and selective coding by the first author (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The combination of observations and initial interpretations by the first author and analysis by the second author reduced potential interpretation bias (Boeije, 2009; Patton, 1999). First, the observation logs were read carefully and divided into coded fragments, through open coding in ATLAS.ti (2017). We discovered that caseworkers spend relatively little time deciding what kind of treatment trajectory an individual client should receive but rather devoted a large amount of their time motivating clients to participate in the activation policies. They spend most of their time employing different strategies to motivate the clients to actively search for a job and participate in concrete back-to-work activities, such as workshops on writing application letters, individual coaching sessions to discuss job openings, and training sessions to boost certain skills. These codes were then coded axially; that is, synonymous codes (e.g., "adjusting expectation client" and "correcting clients' expectations") were merged, and distinct codes were clustered to identify relevant themes, patterns, and relationships.

During the axial coding, we realized that the main categories of the motivational strategies we that emerged during the coding fit the main categories of the FRLM presented by Bass (1999): transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire. The FRLM, as the name suggests, attempts to depict all possible leadership styles and places them on a continuum ranging from active transformational and transactional leadership styles to a passive laissez-faire leadership style (Kirkbride, 2006). Bass thus regarded leadership styles not as separate leadership traits belonging to individual leaders but as part of a single continuum where leaders can move from more inactive laissez-faire to active transactional or transformational leadership styles depending on the situation (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass, 1991; Trottier, Van Wart, & Wang, 2008). We, therefore, used the FRLM as a framework in the selective coding process to help categorize the different motivational strategies, through a combination of inductive and deductive analysis, going back and forth between empirical findings and potential theoretical explanations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the next section, the results of the coding and analysis are presented.

3 | RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The data showed that caseworkers used 10 distinct motivational strategies in their interactions with clients. They consciously choose a specific strategy depending on characteristics and expectations of the situation and client and on what they think is needed to activate the client, much like effective leaders that seek to actively adjust their behaviours in order to meet expectations that they themselves as well as their followers in different contexts (Hogg, 2001). The caseworkers deliberately deployed different motivational strategies to steer clients towards behaviour that they deemed necessary in light of the activation trajectory. The main categories of the motivational strategies (transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and laissez-faire leadership) fit within the FRLM presented by Bass (1999).

Using the FRLM as a framework for categorizing the motivational strategies helped us gain further insight into how caseworkers use their motivational strategies to "steer" the behaviour of their clients by typifying them as not only supportive or coercive but more specifically as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Moreover, placing the motivational strategies along a similar continuum helps illustrate that the strategies are not mutually exclusive or a characteristic of an individual caseworker but rather that individual caseworkers employ different strategies, depending on to what they deem necessary to steer the client towards the goals of the activation policy.

In the next subsections, we explain, illustrate, and categorize these strategies along the continuum shown in Figure 1, which is inspired by the FRLM.

3.1 | Transformational motivational strategies

During intake sessions, follow-up sessions, and training sessions, caseworkers often employed strategies to motivate citizens to participate in activation trajectories that can be linked to transformational leadership. Transformational leaders have been found able to communicate a vision and bring employees together to achieve a particular goal (Avolio et al., 1999). Because they have the trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect of their followers, employees become motivated to do more than they are originally asked to do (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Yukl, 1999). As a result, transformational leadership is often found to positively influence commitment to change (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Michaelis, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2010). The caseworkers also used transformational motivational strategies to influence commitment to a change albeit a personal change, the change from unemployed to employed. We identified four main transformational motivational strategies that the caseworkers employed to motivate their clients: (a) showing empathy and sympathy, (b) communicating a vision, (c) breaking down the hierarchy between client and caseworker, and (d) creating a positive group dynamics among clients.

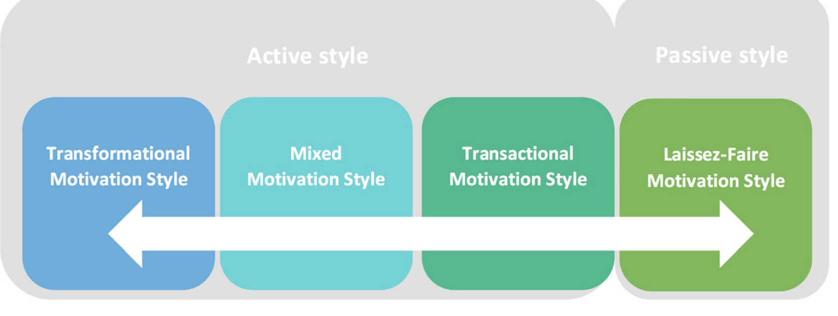

FIGURE 1 Full range of motivational strategies [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

All intake and follow-up sessions started in a similar fashion: with the caseworker asking how the client was doing, in regard to both finding work and their personal lives. The caseworkers then responded to the answers of the clients in a sympathetic way and showed empathy for the client's situation. By showing empathy and sympathy, caseworkers tried to make the clients feel heard. When clients talked about difficult, sad, or negative aspects of their situation, caseworkers showed empathy or sympathy by listening, nodding, and giving short reactions by using words like “gosh,” “gee,” and “wow,” saying things that show they understood what the clients were going through (“that must be difficult for you”), and by taking a genuine interest in clients' lives. Next to making the clients feel heard, caseworkers often responded to the stories of their clients by pointing out the positive aspects in the stories, thereby trying to communicate a vision of what having a job could mean for them and how this might make their life much better. For example:

> *During a follow-up session, a client said he had applied for a job at a gym but had not heard back yet. The caseworker suggested he would drop by the gym after their meeting and just ask them. The client was not sure this was the right thing to do. The caseworker then tried to convince him to do it by visualizing his future: “And you know what, if you make some money, and you get a new girlfriend, you can take her out to dinner. And buy her a present sometime. How would that make you feel?” The client responded smiling: “That would be great of course! And I also want to pay my parents back. It would be great to have an income, yes, that's what I want.” (CW20)*

By communicating a vision of the future, caseworkers tried to persuade clients to follow the caseworker's advice and act, as they explained in the interviews. During group training sessions, caseworkers took it a step further and suggested ways that clients themselves could visualize their future. For example, one caseworker gave her or his clients the following suggestion:

> *“What you can do is draw a stepladder on a piece of paper. And then you draw yourself at the bottom of the ladder, and your goal at the end of the stepladder. For example, getting your nursing diploma. And every time you do something, for example if you had a good talk with your psychologist, or with me, or when you did some volunteer work, every step in the right direction, you mark on that ladder. That way you can visualize the process you're going through. Because you're doing it one step at a time.” The client nods: “I could try that.” (CW20)*

Caseworkers also shared their own insecurities or experiences with work, marriage, or raising children to make the clients feel more comfortable and break down any hierarchical relationship that might be there (e.g., by saying “we are humans too”) and to elicit a collaborating attitude of the client. Sharing their own experiences was strategically deployed in both serious and humorous manner to break down the hierarchy between client and caseworker, as they explained in interviews. Caseworkers told their personal stories in both serious and humorous manner. Caseworkers argued in the interviews that they often tell personal stories in a serious manner, to give clients a good example and inspire them. The following observation illustrates this:

> *The caseworker and the client have an intake meeting. They sit in front of each other at a table. The caseworker starts the conversation by telling the client: “I have sat on the other side of the table as well. I understand the situation and the frustration very well. I was just married and got my first kid, and then I lost my job. But I also know, it can turn out well. I found a job when I was dependent on social benefits.” Client responds: “Ah, okay, so you see what I am coming from.” (CW14)*

Caseworkers also shared their own personal stories in a more humorous way to keep the conversation light and the interaction pleasant and to put clients' problems in perspective. In addition, caseworkers with a migrant background stressed in the interviews that they often refer to their background or ethnicity to relate to clients with a similar background. For example:

> *During an empowerment-training for female migrants, a client says that she is so busy raising her small children, that she does not have the time to find work. The caseworker, a woman with a migrant background herself, replies by telling her that having young children is not an excuse for not working, and that men and women have to divide household tasks between them. She says: "do you think that my husband is the boss at home? No way!" The clients in the training start laughing. (CW1)*

During group sessions, the interaction between client and caseworker was different than in individual sessions, because there were usually at least two caseworkers and a small group of clients, all with their own personal stories and reasons for being there. Caseworkers tried to create informal, positive group dynamics among and between clients in such group meetings while maintaining a clear hierarchical relationship. In these group meetings, caseworkers stimulated clients to call each other by their first names, make jokes, and laugh with each other. Caseworkers explained after the group meetings that they wanted clients to feel at ease, able to help and inspire each other, to ask each other questions, and to show respect despite differences in background, level of education, and language proficiency. The following example illustrates nicely how caseworkers strategically used group dynamics to motivate clients to participate:

> *In the first meeting of a new group, the caseworkers suggest clients to introduce themselves by answering five personal questions. One client responds enthusiastically and says it seems like a good way to get to know each other, which she finds useful as the group will see each other twice a week for the next six months. Another client protests and exclaims: "I don't want to be that open to people I don't know! Nothing about life cheers me up anymore, so I don't want to talk about my life." The caseworkers calmly respond by saying that he does not have to do so, if does not want to: "you determine what your limit is, and what questions you want to answer." The client continues to resist, and caseworker CW3 suggests they start the introduction with the enthusiastic client. While all the clients tell their personal story, the angry client sits with his arms crossed over his chest. But, when it is finally his turn, he explains why he does not like to talk about himself and by doing so he actually shares a lot about himself and his life. (CW3 and CW4)*

This example shows how the caseworker did not force the client to do anything, but in the end, it resulted in what she or he wanted the client to do: tell stories about himself and open up to the group, which contributed to the "group" feeling, as the caseworker explained in the interview. The caseworker explained that she or he saw this as a form of empowerment of the client at the same time: she or he thinks that in this way, the client felt in charge, was allowed to set his limits and those of the caseworkers, and the group members respected these limits. The caseworker thus chose the right motivational strategy for this situation and was able to get the client to show the behaviour that she or he deemed desirable. In doing so, the caseworkers did clearly prefer more motivational or supportive strategies. Caseworkers generally applied transformational strategies to motivate their clients. In the interviews, caseworkers explained that they find motivating clients through transformational strategies the most interesting and challenging part of their work, especially when this leads to direct effects. As caseworker explains to the interviewer how this is easier for younger clients:

> *Working with youth is an advantage. They do not have that much experience with social benefits nor with work. They are more "malleable." It is different when your client has been on social benefits for years or has list his job already several times in his life. These clients are more rebellious, they want less, they do not believe in it anymore. It is easier to motivate and activate young people, that's what I enjoy about my work. (CW23)*

3.2 | Transactional motivational strategy

When these transformational motivational strategies failed to reach the desired result, caseworkers switched to more transactional strategies. This shows that caseworkers can employ different styles of motivating clients to show the behaviour that they deem necessary for the implementation of the activation policies. Similar to transformational leadership, transactional leadership can also result in employees changing their behaviour, but—different than transformational leadership—in exchange for praise, rewards, or avoidance of disciplinary action (Conway & Monks, 2008). Transactional leadership is thus a process of leader–subordinate exchange of rewards (Yukl, 1999). We identified three different transactional strategies that caseworkers employed in motivating their clients to find work and participate in back-to-work activities: (a) rewarding, (b) sanctioning, and (c) bartering.

The transactional motivational strategy that caseworkers used the most was rewarding clients. In particular, caseworkers rewarded clients for their efforts by giving them praise. Caseworkers, for example, complimented clients on their positive attitude, on their preparation for sessions, or for applying for jobs. By giving praise, caseworkers told the interviewer that they attempted to reward clients for their efforts in the activation trajectory and keep them motivated to continue to do so. Caseworkers sometimes also bartered with clients and used a "tit-for-tat" strategy. One caseworker, for example, promised to find a client volunteer work, but only if the client promised to go see her or his physician to discuss her or his gloominess. By bartering, the caseworker tried to get the client to do something she or he thought would contribute to the client's activation trajectory, in this case seeking help for her or his depression.

Within the transactional-motivation spectrum, the strictest strategy that we observed that caseworkers use to motivate their clients was sanctioning. Sanctioning was used in situations when clients did not fulfil their obligations in activation trajectories. Caseworkers applied different types of sanctions depending on the actual misconduct as well as the clients' history and any specific personal circumstances. For example, we observed a group session in which one of the clients was handing out treats to the other participants. He had to bring treats because he had been too late to the previous session. The caseworkers told the interviewer afterwards that their "bring a treat" sanction was employed as a fun way to remind everybody that they are expected to be on time while also adding to the positive atmosphere in the group.

At one welfare agency, the local policy rule prescribed that caseworkers have to report it when a client is more than 10 min late for a session. Subsequently, a disciplinary session is scheduled in which a specialized "sanction" caseworker decides whether or not the client should be punished, and in particular if benefits will be cut. Caseworkers at this agency explained in the interviews that disciplinary sessions were often used as a warning mechanism, because clients really feared those meetings. Caseworkers were careful with actual sanctioning, because they felt imposing sanctions increased the risk of demotivating clients to cooperate in their activation process. In fact, they only sanctioned clients when all other motivational strategies failed, which usually happened when clients did not show up at all and, thus, were unable to listen to the caseworker's motivational speeches and to receive praise or sympathy. A caseworker explained to the interviewer:

> *It's really annoying if people don't show up for the training. It's also annoying to give somebody a penalty, but sometimes you have to, in order to get through to somebody. People have to do their duties. (CW13)*

3.3 | Mixed-motivational strategy

Next to transformational and transactional motivational strategies, we also observed two mixed strategies: (a) "good cop/bad cop" strategy and (b) correcting the expectations of the clients. In these strategies, caseworkers combined aspects of transformational and transactional motivational strategies to get their clients to participate in the activation trajectory.

During group sessions, we noticed that caseworkers sometimes adopted a good cop/bad cop strategy. As these group sessions were usually organized by two caseworkers, caseworkers were given the opportunity to literally employ different motivation strategies in one session. In particular, we, for example, observed one caseworker who attempted to relate with the clients in a friendly way, while the other caseworker was stressing the rights and obligations of social assistance. Caseworkers expressed in the interviews after the group session that they deemed it important that clients feel safe and appreciated, but meanwhile needed strict assistance as well in order to be "activated." By using a good cop/bad cop motivation strategy, they were able to do both at the same time.

Correcting the expectations of clients was another mixed strategy we observed during our field study. Caseworkers frequently tried to make clients realize that their expectations or dreams were unrealistic and explained how holding on to them would not be helpful in finding a job. These caseworkers explained to the interviewer that they followed the local policy rule to help their clients find a paid job as quickly as possible, and clients' dreams do not always fit with this policy aim. The following observation illustrates how a caseworker tried to correct a client's job expectations as a way to motivate them to find work and thus show the behaviour the caseworker deemed desirable and necessary for fulfilling the goals of the activation policy:

> *The caseworker is meeting a young client, who is still subject to compulsory education and lacks a basic qualification to start working. She needs to go back to school and apply for financial support for students. The client explains she would like to start a course to become a veterinary assistant. The caseworker says starting this course might not be so good, and she really should give it some more thought: "you should also look at what is going to get you a job. We could all start doing what we'd like to do, but it will still be work. Of course, you have to do it every day and you have to enjoy it, but being a veterinary assistant is not something you'll likely find a job in." The client nods and says that she will think about it. (CW21)*

In another interaction, we observed that a caseworker presented a vacancy for a gardener to her or his client, emphasizing a lot of benefits and career opportunities for him when applying for this job, but her or his client is hesitant about it. The caseworker explains in the interview:

> *I understand that working as a gardener is not what he had in mind, but this truly is a big chance for him. And I tried to make that clear to him. So then I get a little stricter, then I start pushing a little bit. That also works to get him active: if he really does not want to work as a gardener, he has to come up with something else himself very quickly. So it forces him also a little to find something by himself that he finds suitable for him. (CW20)*

3.4 | Laissez-faire approach

A final leadership strategy that the caseworkers used was a laissez-faire approach. In contrast to transformational and transactional leadership, which are active leadership styles, laissez-faire leaders are passive leaders who appear to be indifferent to what is happening, abdicate responsibilities, refrain from intervening, and divert attention (Bass, 1996). During group sessions, we observed that caseworkers did not have enough time to help every individual client, so they had to divide their attention. However, the caseworkers did not give all clients equal attention but rather tried to motivate some clients, while "ignoring" others. For example, during a training session, one client was sitting quietly in a corner of the room, he did not say anything, and he did not get any personal attention from the caseworker. In another session, we observed the following situation:

> *During the training a forty-year-old woman is talking loudly. She's talking a lot with the other participants about this and that, and does not appear to be working much. She says there is not really something (a job*

vacancy) for her in there. The caseworkers do not really respond to this and instead focus on the clients with specific questions. (CW10 and CW11)

By ignoring clients who do not participate or ask questions, and helping the ones that are asking questions, the laissez-faire approach does include a bit of transactional leadership. Ignoring certain clients does mean that the other clients are rewarded for speaking up and asking for help by actually getting attention. Also, clients who refuse to cooperate with the training could interpret ignorance as a “lesson” to be more positive next time.

4 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Caseworkers are front-line workers always drawn between the individual needs of their clients and the need to execute general policies and ensure the successfulness of those policies. To deal with this dilemma, front-line workers develop adaptive and sometimes creative strategies that, in essence, are a type of decision making in the field (Arnold, 2015; Lipsky, 1980). These adaptive strategies are not part of a plan but emerge as they interact with individual clients, although patterns do emerge. Caseworkers have been found to hold different approaches to what they deem necessary for successful implementation of the activation policy (Bonvin, 2008); however, little is still known about these different approaches.

In our study—unlike other studies on the behaviour of front-line workers—we observed front-line workers during their interaction with clients and reflected with them on this interaction in reflective interviews directly afterwards. During our observations, we observed caseworkers deploy the following 10 strategies to motivate their clients to actively participate in activation trajectories and find a job: (a) showing empathy and sympathy, (b) communicating a vision, (c) breaking down the hierarchy between client and caseworker, (d) creating a positive group dynamics, (e) good cop/bad cop, (f) correcting the expectations of clients, (g) rewarding, (h) sanctioning, (i) bartering, and (j) laissez-faire.

In line with earlier studies, we found that the observed activation strategies involved a mix of supportive and coercive elements (Sainsbury, 2008; Senghaas et al., 2018). The observed motivational strategies ranged from supportive (showing empathy and sharing experiences, to reminding clients of their legal duties) to specific cases that are more coercive (sanctioning). Caseworkers explained in the interviews that they felt that they had different “tools in their toolkit,” which they could use and match to the needs and characteristics of the client, thereby trying to increase clients' motivation to show the desired behaviour and cooperate, commit, and participate in the activation policies.

Our research shows that the scope of front-line workers' agency is larger than sometimes believed. Whereas Lipskian front-line workers are assumed to alter their behaviour due to organizational pressures, and balancing irreconcilable demands from policy and clients (Lipsky, 1980), our research indicates that front-line discretion also entails agency within the execution of motivational strategies (e.g., decide when praise is due). Moreover, some caseworkers found the strategic use of these motivational strategies the most interesting part of their work, which might be related to the relative autonomy they have in designing and applying these motivational strategies.

During the axial coding, we realized that the main categories of the motivational strategies that emerged fit the main categories of the FRLM by Bass (1999) of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. Using the FRLM as a framework allowed us to categorize the strategies and place them on a continuum ranging from passive (laissez-faire) to active (transactional to transformational) and thereby show that individual caseworkers have a full range of motivational strategies at their disposal that they can deploy in different situations and that a choice for a strategy is not a character trait of the individual caseworker.

Although our inductive observational study, supplemented by reflected interviews, has provided clear and systematic insights into the behaviour of caseworkers, further research is needed to study the causes and consequences of the different motivational strategies in more detail. To start with, although the caseworkers are in a position of power and may choose their motivational strategy to match client and situation, their behaviour might be informed by organizational and accountability pressures (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 1980), loyalty to the state or citizens (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), their operationalization of relevant policies (Håvold, 2018), or their professional frames (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002), which earlier studies on front-line workers found to have affected their behaviour.

Hence, this also raises the question on how these pressures or frames influence the choice for a strategy. Our findings show that the caseworkers in our study interpret activation policy as “quick” and “realistic” reintegration into the labour market, but it is not clear what “quick” and “realistic” means in the light of their strategy choices.

Next to institutional pressures, the choice for particular motivational strategies may depend on background factors of individual caseworkers. Studies on the antecedents of leadership show that the characteristics of the leaders affect their leadership behaviour and choice for employing a specific style. For example, the ability to recognize emotions and personality of the leader contributes to more transformational leadership behaviour (Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005), and key life experiences influence the development of effective transformational leadership (Avolio, 1994). Although it was interesting to see in our study that caseworkers who preferred transformational strategies in this study often had a higher educational degree in a related field as opposed to the caseworkers who preferred transactional strategies, the limited scope of the study prevented us in identifying the antecedents of the choice for specific motivational strategies. Understanding why caseworkers prefer to and actually use specific motivational strategies can help organizations train or select caseworkers who are capable of applying the motivational strategies that fit their activation policies and vision on activation. Further research into the antecedents of the use of the motivational strategies is thus necessary.

Another factor that may influence the motivation chosen by caseworkers is the behaviour of their own managers, that is, their own leaders. As our study identifies caseworkers as motivational leaders to their clients, it also raises the question of what this means for the leadership behaviour of their own superiors. Do caseworkers who successfully deploy a wide range of motivational strategies, for example, have superiors who are able to deploy a full range of leadership as well? Or does the leadership style of their superior not affect their own style? We, therefore, also call specifically for further research into relationship between the leadership of their own supervisor and the strategies employed by the caseworkers.

In a similar vein, although we did observe the caseworkers elicit motivation in their clients on the observed moment, we could not examine the long-term effects of the motivational strategies deployed by caseworkers. For example, transformational leadership is considered to be more effective in achieving behavioural change and generating motivation (Kirkbride, 2006; Masi & Cooke, 2000), and in the reflective interviews, the caseworkers indicated a clear preference for the more transformational strategies, because they felt that these strategies were most useful in motivating clients and getting them to participate in the activation trajectories. However, based on our data, we cannot corroborate the caseworkers' preference and gut feeling. We, therefore, suggest further, more longitudinal research into the conditions and effects of the different strategies, on the short, medium, and long terms. Do transformational motivational strategies actually result in more motivated clients and generate better activation results than do laissez-faire or transactional motivational strategies? And under which circumstances are they most successful? A longitudinal study will also provide insight into the relationship between the different motivational strategies and if the sequence of strategies, for example, affects the successfulness of overall activation trajectory.

Furthermore, the application of the FRLM shows us that the relationship between a caseworker and a client is hierarchical and thus by definition not equal. Caseworkers are in a situation of influence and power, unlike the clients. Caseworkers after all work of a municipality or welfare agency and as such play a role in deciding whether a client will receive social benefits or not. In general, this influence might be benign; it, however, does not mean it could not progress into a destructive wielding of power (Hogg, 2001) or a situation of arbitrariness and randomness. By viewing the caseworkers as leaders, who are people in a position of influence, it also opens our eyes to the potential negative effects of their motivational strategies too. Although there are usually clear guidelines for caseworkers for transactional motivational strategies (e.g., when they have to report a client for a misconduct and under which circumstances they can cut benefits), when we look at the laissez-faire motivational strategy, we see that caseworkers react to the level of cooperation of clients in deciding whether they are going to help the client or not. However, the perception of who is cooperative and really trying is not exempt from stereotypical beliefs (Raaphorst & Van De Walle, 2017), and caseworkers who determine who deserves their help most can create a situation of inequality. Perhaps the client who sits quietly in the corner requires their help the most. Thus, a laissez-faire approach can also be viewed as what Lipsky and Smith (1989) referred to as "creaming": selecting the clients who are most likely to succeed in bureaucratic terms.

Along similar lines, there are no guidelines for when praise is due, what expectations need to be corrected, or which kind of vision is communicated. In other words, the more transformational strategies are not without risks too. For example, in deploying the "correcting the expectations" strategy, caseworkers decide that the expectation of the client needs to be correct and what would be a correct expectation. They do not have a guidebook determining what would be an attainable career for a client and what is not. So they use their experience, gut feeling, or personal preference to do this. This can be benign and leaves clients feeling inspired to find something that will be attainable for them, but it can also be more destructive and can pressure clients into pursuing a job that they hate. Just as there is a dark side to transformational leadership where leaders use their abilities to inspire and lead followers to destructive, selfish, and potentially evil ends (Tourish, 2013), there could be a dark side to transformational motivational strategies by front-line workers as well.

Hence, organizations need to be aware of the autonomy that comes with providing caseworkers more autonomy to choose motivational strategies and determine the degree in which they deem this desirable. It can, for example, raise issues regarding the transparency and democratic principles, for example, when caseworkers neglect or downplay influence of hindrances to clients' participation in activation trajectories, such as health-related problems (Håvold, 2018), specific recruitment requirements of employees or sectors (Hagelund, 2016) or discrimination (age, gender, or ethnicity), stereotyping, and prejudice in recruitment. This, therefore, calls for further research into the potential dark side of expanding the agency of caseworkers via the different motivational strategies.

The results of this study and the outlined implications should be interpreted in light of the limited scope of the research. Using observations and reflective interviews allowed us to understand the welfare services "on the ground" (Exley, 2019): It provides first-hand insights into caseworkers' practices, reactions, and means for challenges in their work, and which motives direct these practices. Our data are, however, limited to a snapshot of the process of motivational activation. Through "zooming in" on the motivational practices of caseworkers, we limited our possibilities to "zoom out" to the broader, organizational context of their practices, what happens after the observed practices, and whether these practices are similar in different times and spaces (Nicolini, 2009). To generate more insight in this process of motivational activation, caseworkers and their clients should be observed for a longer period of time and a broader scope of influential factors on caseworkers' practices should be taken into account.

Although we were able to observe caseworkers interacting with clients during multiple occasions at multiple locations in two Dutch welfare agencies and to interview them afterwards, it is difficult to directly generalize our findings to other types of front-line workers. However, in their daily interactions with clients, it can be argued that many other front-line workers are motivational workers too, often with an unequal (hierarchical) relationship to their clients. Street-corner workers stimulate youngsters to stop using drugs, teachers encourage students to do their homework, and nurses try to motivate patients to take their medicines. This raises the question of whether other front-line workers apply similar motivational strategies as the caseworkers do and, if yes, under what conditions. We, therefore, call for further research into the application of the motivational strategy continuum by other front-line workers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the two welfare agencies for participating in the research, the caseworkers for allowing us to observe them at work, the clients for giving their consent to observe their meetings with their caseworkers, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

ENDNOTE

[1] An overview of the observed client–caseworker interactions is not included in this article to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the observants.

ORCID

Jolien Grandia https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0663-8606

REFERENCES

Arnold, G. (2015). Street-level policy entrepreneurship. *Public Management Review*, *17*(3), 307–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.806577

Atkinson, P. (1997). *The clinical experience: The construction and reconstruction of medical reality*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

ATLAS.ti. (2017). Qualitative data analysis and research software [computer software]. https://atlasti.com/.

Avolio, B. J. (1994). The "natural": Some antecedents to transformational leadership. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *17*(9), 1559–1581. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900699408524956

Avolio, B. J., Bass, B. M., & Jung, D. I. (1999). Re-examining the components of transformational and transactional leadership using the multifactor leadership. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *72*(4), 441–462. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317999166789

Bass, B. M. (1991). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics*, *18*(3), 19–31.

Bass, B. M. (1996). A new paradigm of leadership: An inquiry into transformational leadership Alexandria, VA U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.

Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *8*(1), 9–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398410

Boeije, H. (2009). *Analysis in qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.

Bonvin, J. (2008). Activation policies, new modes of governance and the issue of responsibility. *Social Policy and Society*, *7*(3), 367–377. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746408004338

Considine, M., Nguyen, P., & O'Sullivan, S. (2018). New public management and the rule of economic incentives: Australian welfare-to-work from job market signalling perspective. *Public Management Review*, *20*(8), 1186–1204. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1346140

Conway, E., & Monks, K. (2008). HR practices and commitment to change: An employee-level analysis. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *18*(1), 72–89.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153.

DeLeon, P., & DeLeon, L. (2002). What ever happened to policy implementation? An alternative approach. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *12*(4), 467–492. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a003544

Eikenaar, T., Rijk, A. E., & Meershoek, A. (2016). What's in a frame? How professionals assess clients in Dutch work reintegration practice. *Social Policy and Administration*, *50*(7), 767–786. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12151

Exley, S. (2019). Social administration revisited: Traditions of observational fieldwork and their value. *Social Policy and Administration*, *53*(1), 49–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12411

Gold, R. L. (1957). Roles in sociological field observations. *Social Forces*, *36*(3), 217–616.

Hagelund, A. (2016). The activating profession: Coaching and coercing in the welfare services. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, *29*(7), 725–739. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-02-2016-0036

Håvold, O. K. (2018). Opportunity talk, work talk and identity talk: Motivating strategies used by the Norwegian labour and welfare offices. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *8*(2), 158–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2017.1405836

Herold, D. M., Fedor, D. B., Caldwell, S. D., & Liu, Y. (2008). The effects of transformational and change leadership on employees' commitment to a change: A multilevel study. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93*(2), 346–357. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.93.2.346

Hogg, M. A. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *5*(3), 184–200. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503_1

Hupe, P., & Buffat, A. (2014). A public service gap: Capturing contexts in a comparative approach of street-level bureaucracy. *Public Management Review*, *16*(4), 548–569. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.854401

Hupe, P., & Hill, M. (2007). Street-level bureaucracy and public accountability. *Public Administration*, *85*(2), 279–299. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2007.00650.x

Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk is cheap: Ethnography and the attitudinal fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research*, *43*(2), 178–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124114523396

Kirkbride, P. (2006). Developing transformational leaders: The full range leadership model in action. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, *38*(1), 23–32. https://doi.org/10.1108/00197850610646016

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation Publications.

Lipsky, M., & Smith, S. R. (1989). Nonprofit organizations, government, and the welfare state. *Political Science Quarterly*, *104*(4), 625–648. https://doi.org/10.2307/2151102

Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. (1995). *Analyzing social settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Masi, R. J., & Cooke, R. A. (2000). Effects of transformational leadership on subordinate motivation, empowering norms, and organizational productivity. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, *8*(1), 16–47. https://doi.org/10.1108/eb028909

Maynard-Moody, S., & Musheno, M. C. (2003). *Cops, teachers, counselors: Stories from the front lines of public service*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11924

McDonald, C., & Marston, G. (2008). Motivating the unemployed? Attitudes at the front line. *Australian Social Work*, *61*(4), 315–326. https://doi.org/10.1080/03124070802428167

Michaelis, B., Stegmaier, R., & Sonntag, K. (2010). Shedding light on followers' innovation implementation behavior: The role of transformational leadership, commitment to change, and climate for initiative. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *25*(4), 408–429. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683941011035304

Nicolini, D. (2009). Zooming in and zooming out: A package of method and theory to study work practices. In S. Ybema, D. Yanow, H. Wels, & F. Kamsteeg H. (Eds.), *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexity of everyday life* (pp. 120–139). London: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446278925.n7

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, *34*(5 Pt 2), 1189–1208.

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., & Bommer, W. H. (1996). Transformational leader behaviors and substitutes for leadership as determinants of employee satisfaction, commitment, trust, and organizational citizenship behaviors. *Journal of Management*, *22*(2), 259–298.

Raaphorst, N., & Van De Walle, S. (2017). A signaling perspective on bureaucratic encounters: How public officials interpret signals and cues. *Social Policy and Administration*, *52*, 1367–1378. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12369

Rice, D. (2013). Street-level bureaucrats and the welfare state. Toward a micro-institutionalist theory of policy implementation. *Administration and Society*, *45*(9), 1038–1062. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399712451895

Rubin, R. S., Munz, D. C., & Bommer, W. H. (2005). Leading from within: The effects of emotion recognition and personality on transformational leadership behavior. *Academy of Management Journal*, *48*(5), 845–858. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2005.18803926

Sainsbury, R. (2008). Administrative justice, discretion and the 'welfare to work' project. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, *30*(4), 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/09649060802580995

Senghaas, M., Freier, C., & Kupka, P. (2018). Practices of activation in frontline interactions: Coercion, persuasion, and the role of trust in activation policies in Germany. *Social Policy and Administration*, *53*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12443

Solvang, I. (2017). Discretionary approaches to social workers' personalisation of activation services for long-term welfare recipients. *European Journal of Social Work*, *20*(4), 536–547. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2016.1188777

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York, NY: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

Tourish, D. (2013). *The dark side of transformational leadership: A critical perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203558119

Trottier, T., Van Wart, M., & Wang, X. (2008). Examining the nature and significance of leadership in government organizations. *Public Administration Review*, *68*(2), 319–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00865.x

Van Berkel, R., & Borghi, V. (2007). New modes of governance in activation policies. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *27*(7/8), 277–286. https://doi.org/10.1108/01443330710773854

van Berkel, R., van der Aa, P. H. J., & van Gestel, N. (2010). Professionals without a profession? Redesigning case management in Dutch local welfare agencies: Professionals zonder professie? Klantmanagement in Nederlandse sociale diensten. *European Journal of Social Work*, *13*(4), 447–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691451003603455

van der Aa, P. H. J. (2012). Activeringswerk in uitvoering. *Bureaucratische en professionele dienstverlening in drie sociale diensten* (PhD Dissertation).

Van Parys, L., & Struyven, L. (2018). Interaction styles of street-level workers and motivation of clients: A new instrument to assess discretion-as-used in the case of activation of jobseekers. *Public Management Review*, *20*(11), 1702–1721. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2018.1438501

Winter, S. (1999). New directions for implementation research. *Policy Currents*, *8*(4), 1–5.

Ybema, S., Yanow, D., Wels, H., & Kamsteeg, F. H. (2009). *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexity of everyday life*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446278925

Yukl, G. (1999). An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *10*(2), 285–305. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(99)00013-2

How to cite this article: Grandia J, La Grouw YM, Kruyen PM. Motivating the unemployed: A full-range model of motivational strategies that caseworkers use to activate clients. *Soc Policy Admin*. 2019;1–15. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12540