

## WERK IN UITVOERING

# Getting the job done: A narrative approach in person-centered service provision for unemployed people in a vulnerable position.

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## 1 Introduction

As the public service system gains complexity, it is harder for citizens to find and access the services they need.<sup>1</sup> Social law and policy are made by the higher echelons of the administrative system and often omit an important point of view: that of the people who receive the services they provide.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, pleas for research and policy to close the gap between the system world ('systeemwereld') and the experiential world ('leefwereld') are gaining traction. One of the most voiced propositions is to incorporate the experiences of service users in all layers of the system world.<sup>3</sup> User experiences are important because, without them, delivering person-centred services is nearly impossible; administrative agencies and regulatory authorities are focused on general service provision and risk-based regulations and do not have the tools to oversee the complexity of circumstances of citizens with multiple problems.<sup>4</sup>

The present study focuses on the development and workings of person-centred service provision for citizens in a vulnerable position on the labour market.<sup>5</sup> This contribution describes my general research design and shares some preliminary findings. Section 2 highlights the value of person-centred services. Section 3 explains the research methodology. Section 4 presents preliminary results of interviews with welfare clients. Section 5 covers the challenges I encountered.

## 2 The Need for Person-Centred Service Provision

Studies have shown a link between long-term unemployment and the prevalence of mental problems, poor education, poverty and unemployment.<sup>6</sup> The label 'multi

1 Van der Meer 2018.

2 Van der Steen 2022; 's Jongers 2022; Speed and Reeves 2023.

3 Ippel and Beirnaert 2022; Grit and Pot n.d.; Bokhorst 2022.

4 Grit and Pot n.d.

5 The present research is part of the RUN-project and funded by NWO. In the RUN-project, I work together with academic and societal partners and Dutch national regulatory authorities on the research and development of reflexive regulatory arrangements that foster person-centred services for citizens in vulnerable positions.

6 Fryers, Melzer, and Jenkins 2003; Fryers et al. 2005.

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problems' occurs relatively often within this population, as long-term unemployed may have issues with housing, finances, healthcare and regaining employment.<sup>7</sup> This also means that long-term unemployed people will likely receive services from multiple (public) service providers. For example, one might receive social security benefits from the municipality, assistance from a budgeting volunteer and social support from a community worker. When struggling with problems in multiple domains, it is hard to juggle personal life and bureaucratic formalities, for example, the requirements, paperwork, variable contacts and appointments with different service providers. This doesn't fit well with the current system of public service provision which is set up to be service-oriented, meaning that providers focus on one domain, have little to no contact with other providers and act according to predetermined fixed standards.<sup>8</sup>

Even though there is more attention for the circumstances of citizens with multiple problems, the public service system struggles with the shift to person-centredness. A focal point of person-centredness is promoting multi-sectoral cooperation among frontline officials. A prerequisite for multi-sectoral cooperation is the use of clients' narratives,<sup>9</sup> as it shows the complexity of the needs and wants of clients. Regulatory authorities have expressed interest in adopting a stimulating role. The present study aims to answer the question "How can the narratives of citizens in a vulnerable position on the labour market help administrative agencies and regulatory authorities develop improved person-centred services?"

### 3 Methods

The present research uses qualitative methods in two phases: exploration and two case studies. The exploratory phase consisted of a literature review and narrative interviews with members of the target population. Currently concluding this phase, I will start the case studies in October 2023, which will last one year. In this phase, I will observe two local projects focusing on person-centredness and interview their staff and frontline officials.

#### 3.1 Exploratory Phase

The narrative interviews were conducted with participants who received unemployment benefits for more than six months or welfare benefits for more than one year and were using multiple public services. The labour market region Groningen serves as a study context, as it has the highest untapped labour potential in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup>

The participant recruitment took place between December 2022 and April 2023. Participants were recruited through various methods, such as community centres,

7 Bosselaar et al. 2010.

8 de Kam 2020.

9 In this research, narrative refers to the experiences clients have and how they are communicated. It consists of what a client thinks is most important, such as wants, needs, personal opinions, emotions and contextual factors.

10 Statistics Netherlands 2022.

flyers and snowballing. The recruitment process resulted in eleven participants with diverse backgrounds and histories of services use. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share their stories in their preferred manner. A general topic list was used, covering themes related to various life domains, such as living situation, service provision experiences, missed services, improvement suggestions and future aspirations. The topic list, informed consent form, recruitment procedure and pilot interview were reviewed by experts-by-experience ('ervaringsdeskundigen'), who lived through similar situations themselves.

Participants were treated as experts due to their unique knowledge and experiences with public services. Each participant received a ten-euro voucher as a token of appreciation. In transcription, participants were given pseudonyms. They were given the opportunity to review and adjust their transcript in a follow-up appointment, allowing them to control their narrative. A systematic approach is used to identify relevant themes within participants' accounts, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their experiences within the public service system.

### 3.2 Case Study Phase

Currently, I am finalising agreements with two local projects that work with a person-centred approach. In consultation with these projects, I will observe staff meetings and meetings with collaborating organisations. This way, I am able to research person-centredness on the frontline level, as well as on the middle and top levels. The goal of the observations is to identify bottlenecks, facilitators and workarounds professionals use to collaborate with other service providers in the clients' interests. Another goal is to see when and how professionals (re)tell the narratives of clients in order to support them or get things done. If possible, I will also conduct interviews and/or focus groups to discuss anonymized findings with professionals and get an in-depth understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

## 4 Preliminary Results

### 4.1 'Becoming a Client'

The narrative interviews I conducted in the exploratory phase expose clients' experiences with service providers, revealing complexities and barriers. Participants discussed necessary abilities, like finding the appropriate organisation, communication skills, understanding the jargon, aligning expectations and narrative crafting. Participant Pearl shares that she has learned to use 'magic words' to direct frontline officials to the outcome she desired. The strenuous relationship with her adult children prevents her from moving forward in life, and she wants to talk to them with a therapist present. For this to happen, she needed the 'magic words' to get the therapist's approval.

Well, I had to rephrase my main question, and that is 'becoming a client' at its best. Because you cannot ask something for another person. [...] So I had to have questions where they [therapists] said 'now we will take you.' You must

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say the magic word. Well I found the magic word. I need [my children] to know that they are no longer responsible for what is happening to me.

Pearl's wish for family therapy succeeded through the right language and communication skills. The distinction between understanding what the therapists need to hear and her communicative skills is not always clear; both abilities are important for the outcome in Pearl's narrative. It is also implied that the interplay between practical knowledge and the communication skill of both clients and frontline officials influences the outcomes of interactions. Narratives such as these provide insight into what happens between clients and frontline officials and how clients prepare and communicate what is important to them.

#### 4.2 *Strategies*

In interviews, participants discussed issues they faced and how they coped. They often bring a support person to a meeting with a frontline official, ask a frontline official or support person for help finding and assessing information or craft a suitable narrative.

Most participants said they relied on someone else when they found themselves unable to figure something out, usually when struggling with communicative skills. For example, Marjolein, burnt out and struggling with letters, leaned on her counsellor who assisted with other issues at that time. This counsellor helped with reading and interpreting the letters and made necessary arrangements. She emphasised how lucky she was to have this supportive counsellor, without whom she wouldn't have managed as well.

Yes. I thought she [counsellor] was really great. In one word, great. She really did everything. And no matter what I came to her for, whether it was taxes or whatever. She even did the income tax and everything with me. Truly, we have done all sorts of things together at my house. Of course I had to do the income taxes and then I couldn't get into the system either. So yeah, [...] we filled in everything in a really toddler-like way [laughs].

This exemplifies the vital role a support person can play in helping clients manage various aspects of their lives. They shape the context in which clients operate and what quick-fixes clients find.

## 5 Challenges

During my research, I encountered methodological challenges. Each participant had a unique background, making it important to strike a balance between following a semi-structured topic list and allowing natural story-sharing. The recruitment, interviewing and transcription were time-consuming and – sometimes – sensitive processes.

As my research delves into the case studies, other challenges will arise. Collaborating with the aforementioned local projects and gaining access to relevant staff meetings

and interactions with other service providers might prove challenging due to organisational policies or privacy concerns. Another challenge I expect to face in the case studies is navigating the gap between the system and experiential world. Incorporating the experiences of clients in all layers of the system will likely be complex, as they currently primarily focus on general service provision and risk-based regulation. My expectation is that this process will be time-consuming but fruitful.

Despite the challenges, I believe that the value of incorporating clients' narratives in service provision and accountability is crucial for the improvement of person-centredness. The preliminary results from the exploratory phase have highlighted the significance of understanding clients' experiences, abilities, communication skills and practical knowledge when dealing with the public service system. Moving forward, I remain committed to the importance of incorporating narratives to improve person-centred services for citizens in a vulnerable position, as they are key to developing more effective and supportive public service systems.

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