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*Empowering functions of welfare
conditionality in Poland
– social workers’ perspective²*

Abstract

Conditional policies are well established in modern European welfare states, as one of the most important economic and social reintegration instruments. The article assesses the relationship between conditionality and empowerment in Polish social assistance, particularly through the use of a social contract (version of an individual action plan). The analysis drew on a survey conducted among managers in social assistance centres and social workers. Results showed a very high level of normative support for conditional welfare arrangements among social workers, similar to the results of studies conducted in other countries. About half of the respondents supported individual social contracts as an effective empowerment instrument. Positive attitudes towards conditionality

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were related to its higher perceived psychological and professional empowering functions. The fit between adopted reintegration measures – social work, vocational training, psychological, and family support – and the perception of empowerment pointed to high organisational coherence in social assistance. The research also shows the importance of the normative acceptance of conditionality in social assistance, which is embedded in welfare policy even if not sufficiently expressed in social work practice.

Keywords: empowerment, social work, social contract, social policy, conditional benefits

Introduction

One of the various dilemmas of the modern welfare state is the choice between basing policies, measures, and benefits on universal entitlements or conditionality. Basic income programmes, which have been gaining popularity in recent years (Atkinson, 2015; Delsen, 2019) are a clear expression of the former. On the opposite end, there are activation and workfare policies where benefits are granted upon fulfilling legal and behavioural conditions including – among other things – participation in active reintegration measures (Clasen & Clegg, 2007). These conditions vary between the different welfare states and social safety net traditions and are established within specific social programmes either in terms of the process of entering a particular social programme or continuing already granted support. Conditional policies have been particularly oriented on labour market (re)integration (van Berkel, 2020; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018), though, in recent years, they have extended beyond the typical workfare state, oriented mainly on the professional (re)activation of the long-term unemployed, to policies targeted at other vulnerable or excluded social categories: people with disabilities, the homeless, the chronically ill, or single parents (Patrick et al., 2011; Reeves & Loopstra, 2017). Increasingly, these policies also seek to change attitudes and behaviours that are only indirectly related to labour market activity; benefit-related sanctions also discipline behaviour considered antisocial – domestic violence, child neglect, and maltreatment, non-compliance with compulsory education, behavioural disorders, or all kinds of addiction. And – in the spirit of the “new paternalism” (Mead, 1997) visible in both US workfare and European activation policies – such behavioural pressure seems natural and expected: “A more cohesive society requires both a more equitable distribution of resources and a greater sense of mutual responsibility. More immediately, both are necessary if anti-social behaviour is to be tackled” (Deacon, 2004, p. 924). Consequently, modern welfare states appear to resolve the dilemmas of constructing social support systems with increasingly common conditionality (Venn, 2012; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 4–7; Gray, 2004) – despite its controversies.

The literature on the welfare state’s transition toward conditionality seems to be dominated by discourse-oriented, critical analyses – emphasising that the mechanisms proposed by the proponents of conditionality-based reintegration policies have more to do with surveillance, social control, and disciplining (in the Foucauldian sense) than with the declared (as part of activation policies) empowerment (see: Soss et al., 2011; Schram et al., 2008; Standing, 2011, Dwyer, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Wacquant, 2008;

Cruikshank, 1996). These analyses tend to focus on power, governance issues, and relations within the institutional structures responsible for the implementation of activation, workfare, or welfare-to-work policies and programmes, and on the (usually critically assessed) latent functions and perverse effects of these policies.

In this article, we are referring to the more empirical (and often equally critical to welfare state reforms as the “Foucauldian”) perspective, building on Michael Lipsky’s (1980) approach, and focusing on the street-level implementation of welfare conditionality. The article addresses the issue of how frontline social workers’ respond to the assumptions of activation policy, in what way they interpret those assumptions, and – in particular – what justifications they share regarding conditionality and welfare sanctions. There is a growing body of literature on street-level research on social work and social policy (see: Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018), various aspects of the frontline reactions to welfare reforms, on the role of discretionary decision-making under pressure to individualise and personalise benefits and services, and on sanctioning, all in an increasingly bureaucratic environment (see: Morgen et al., 2010; Sadeghi & Terum, 2020; chapters in van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007; chapters in Klammer et al., 2019a). However, there is a lack of analyses that set variation in the patterns of the perception and justification of conditionality (behavioural conditionality – typical for the workfare-like solutions in particular) in an organisational context and show which locally relevant factors are responsible for this variation.

This article aims to discuss the perception of conditionality principles among frontline social workers in Poland and their interpretations of the goals and presumed outcomes of the individual action plans (see: van Berkel, 2020; further on we will use – in accordance with the Polish law on social assistance – the term “social contract”) from the perspective of empowerment. In other words, we address one of the main ethical arguments in favour of conditionality. As coercive and disciplining policies typically contain an element of upgrading skills, building up human capital, and other social and psychological competencies (van Berkel et al. 2018), we investigate conditionality in relation to empowerment, an intended effect of a social contract. Empowerment is approached in the article as a multifaceted phenomenon: a tool improving self-perception and motivations for welfare system clients, their labour market (re)integration, and their social activation. This definition reflects an observation that social work managers and frontline workers tend to perceive empowerment and conditionality from the perspective of their clients’ overall (re)integration rather than concentrating solely on a single item, such as the labour market or social integration (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020).

The main research problem of the article concentrates on the organisational factors that impact the outcome of social work and the use of conditional tools and measures. We discuss welfare conditionality, pointing to its dependency upon policy structures and paradigms, the governance context, the occupational context, and the beliefs and attitudes within social assistance. After van Berkel (2017, 2020), we recognise that social workers are the real agents of the welfare state and important policy actors and implementers (Klammer et al., 2019b) who translate the general principles of social policy into practice by making day-to-day decisions about the proper (or – on the contrary – undesirable) and feasible reactions to beneficiaries’ claims, behaviour and de-

servicingness, and to the social problems within their communities. Within this framework, we investigate the support of social workers for welfare conditionality and the level of acceptance of values and attitudes supporting both activation and the use of conditional measures in Polish social assistance. The second question refers to how attitudes and organisational factors (such as social workers' years of experience or different types of activation measures) impact the perceived empowerment of welfare recipients. The analysis was built upon the assumption that successful empowerment results from an interaction of an individual with organisational and social contexts (Hardina, 2005; Speer & Peterson, 2000; Guttiéres et al. 1995).

Empowerment and conditionality – context of the analysis

Welfare conditionality is built on reciprocity, where the mutual rights and obligations of the state welfare institutions, and the individual are established and expected to be followed (White, 2003). Such an approach assumes that each citizen should participate in building the common welfare and that not fulfilling this obligation towards the state is a misuse of trust. Whilst the state guarantees fair and just redistribution, respecting human and social rights, a contract in return gives an individual the obligation to participate and – in the case of those recognised as passive and excluded – to activate. Contractual arrangements should stimulate *good workfare*, understood as welfare policies and activities aimed at achievable goals and a real prospect of returning to the labour market and the community (Goodin, 2002). In this context, European Union social policy – emphasising the need for social inclusion through policies aimed at creating a social environment that empowers vulnerable social groups – also promotes conditional policies and measures (Rymsza, 2013; Rymsza & Karwacki, 2017).

The main criticism of conditionality is that it violates the coherence of citizenship status, which has been identified – following T.H. Marshall (1950) – as the basis of the modern welfare state and the main mechanism of egalitarianism (see: Dwyer, 2004). It is also pointed out that the prevalence of conditionality leads to the transformation of social benefits into a tool mainly for disciplining and re-educating those who “fail to meet the conditions of active citizenship by their readiness to work and be civically engaged” (Rodger, 2008, p. 19). Criticisms of conditionality also have an empirical basis; e.g., it has been shown that conditionality reduces the take-up of welfare benefits (Griggs & Evans, 2010), reinforces a threat of job loss and acceptance of poorer working conditions, and tends to privilege only the initial transition into the labour market without proper care about job quality – thus fostering the precarisation of employment (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Peck, 2002) – and builds negative attitudes towards welfare clients by reinforcing social polarisation (Sage, 2012).

Empowerment is a crucial normative modern social work concept, relating to both inclusive efforts to work with the socially excluded as well as the overall goals of social work and welfare policy, and it is often referred to when the effectiveness of social work is considered. In principle, empowerment should lead to stimulating the capacities of individuals, groups, and communities, enabling them to take control over their own lives and circumstances (Adams, 2008; DuBois & Krosgrud Miley, 2014). From an

individual perspective, taking control is a long-term process of learning how to exercise individual power and capabilities to achieve one's own goals and eventually improve the quality of one's life (Parsons, 1991; Hryniewicka, 2011). In social work practice, empowerment means challenging deficits arising from poverty, unemployment, adverse family circumstances, disability, or other correlates of social exclusion, and conditional instruments are often used as tools of empowerment.

From the street-level perspective, empowering social assistance beneficiaries' is built on the relationship between a social worker and her or his client. Establishing a social contract (an individual action plan) requires the professional to work with the vulnerable person, and often also her or his family, and gradually progress towards empowerment with the person or the family. Empowerment, however, frequently crosses a line into paternalism, wherein life decisions are being imposed by the social welfare institution or other community groups and individuals, and eventually interfere with individual freedom. Reamer (1983, 2005) underlines that paternalistic behaviours are typically justified by a belief that appropriate actions will be undertaken and the person in need is not able to undertake them fully independently. In principle, the empowering interaction between the representative of social assistance and the vulnerable person should rely on trust and reciprocity, though the actual cooperation strongly depends on the perception of both sides of the potential for building up self-confidence, which will eventually lead to social and economic reintegration and well-being (Törrönen et al., 2013; Nothdurfter, 2016).

Taking the organisational perspective, the creation of an activating institutional environment is crucial to support the empowerment process. Gutiérrez et al. (1995) point to the institutional preconditions and barriers to empowerment that are experienced by social workers and other administrative staff. Effectively adopting an empowering approach depends on pre-existing local institutional arrangements (Trætteberg & Grødem, 2022), but also on a given social worker's knowledge, attitude, and accumulated professional experience (Lee, 2001), which is important for an adequate assessment of the client's life circumstances, needs, and capabilities. The latter is prone to subjectivity in evaluating the mental and physical abilities of the social assistance client, assessing her or his relations with the closest social environment, material standing, and mental competencies (Clark, 1998). Social workers tend not to be aware of the complexity of the clients' situation, family, and social environment, or psychological standing, and thus project their interpretation onto clients' behaviours (Hryniewicka, 2011).

Besides interpersonal factors and the engagement of both sides in supporting empowerment, the potential for successful reintegration and improving well-being might also be conditioned by external, institutional factors, including insufficient funding of reintegration activities or poor sustainability in the long run, particularly, if activation measures are introduced within short-term projects. Management within the social welfare institution might also play a role when deciding upon undertaking empowering activities in place of simply mitigating the negative effects of poor economic standing during the social work process and granting income support (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). Finally, but of importance for this study, the normative attitudes, values, and beliefs shared within an organisation might have an impact on social workers' attitudes

towards clients, assessment of their standing, and proposed activities to improve their well-being (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Hryniewicka, 2011; Gjersøe et al., 2020).

Social assistance and the social contract in Poland

The welfare state in Poland has evolved over the transition period from communism to modern capitalism. In the first period of rapidly increasing poverty and skyrocketing unemployment, a social safety net was established based on cash benefits to prevent people from falling into poverty; further welfare policies were shaped by economic drivers and the neo-liberal paradigm (see chapters in: Cerami & Vanhuyse, 2009; Golinowska, 2003; Golinowska, 2009). The key element of this paradigm that directly shaped the reform of social security institutions and the attitude towards redistribution was the emphasis on the individual responsibility of individuals and the generally individualistic orientation clearly present, as Woźniak (2012) writes, in the parliamentary discourse, party programmes, and public debates. Adaptive, individualised strategies for the vulnerable included competition, at the risk of economic and social exclusion, for scarce resources (e.g., by entering early retirement whenever feasible) or turning to informal markets (the grey economy) whilst relying on welfare support (Vanhuyse, 2001). At the same time, welfare institutions were promoting more liberal, welfare-to-work solutions, including those tailored to service individualisation and based on conditions of conduct (Clasen & Clegg, 2007), such as a social contract – an indigenous variant of the individual action plans known from other EU countries (van Berkel, 2020). The trend was not unique, as many welfare states have introduced conditional benefits in social assistance, which was stimulated by policies oriented towards the introduction of a social protection floor and inclusive society (Dornan & Porter, 2013; Watts et al., 2014).

In this article, we concentrate on social contracts, which are the most important welfare policy instrument representing conduct conditionality in Polish social assistance, i.e., in this element of the social protection system, which by definition is conditional (e.g., social assistance is and has always been provided on the basis of an income test). The instrument was introduced to social work by the Law on Social Assistance of 2004 (the same year Poland joined the European Union and started to gradually implement elements of active social policy). Contracts can be voluntarily implemented by social assistance offices; however, this solution is strongly promoted and centres as well as social workers are increasingly encouraged to use it. Being a partnership agreement, though partners are not fully equal in this relation, it is a tool of shared responsibility between the state and the vulnerable person; furthermore, it may even transfer the responsibility from the state to the welfare system client (McDonald & Morston, 2008).

There are different types of social contracts in Poland. Firstly, a contract can be a labour market reintegration instrument. Secondly, it can address other types of problems that lead to social exclusion, including adverse family situations, homelessness, or addictive substance abuse. The agreement includes a list of activities that the client of the social welfare institution should fulfil in order to – as assessed by the social

worker – (re)gain self-confidence, independence, and improve her or his well-being. Although not fulfilling its conditions is linked to penalties, including limitation or withdrawal of material support, the contract is in principle based on a voluntary partnership and is a flagship empowerment tool of the Polish welfare system (Golczyńska-Grondas & Kretek-Kamińska, 2007), granting social workers the power to evaluate the needs of social welfare clients, whilst protecting clients' ability to make independent decisions. In principle, a social welfare client should have the ability to participate in establishing the contract's conditions and agree to them (or not). The optimal goal of a social contract is to support a vulnerable person's capabilities to regain financial, social, and psychological independence (Sen, 1992), which corresponds to the empowerment dimensions included in the analysis.

Despite the fact that social contracts have been used for almost two decades, they are still not common in social work practice in Poland. The share of social assistance beneficiaries with social contracts oscillates around 5% annually, with about one-third of social assistance centres not using this form of conditional benefit (Sowa-Kofta, 2018). The instrument is frequently used within reintegration programmes funded by the European Social Fund and various short-term projects. Data show that, in fact, more than 80% of all social contracts are concluded within EU-funded programmes (Poławski, 2017), which means that the main conditionality measure works insofar as the related, individualised activation measures find additional (i.e., not from the relatively modest but stable and predictable local budgets), and usually relatively generous, external financing.

A look at the situation in Poland, where social assistance is still an institution in *statu nascendi* and where the social support system does not constitute an easily identifiable “welfare regime” (Poławski, 2021) will provide a somewhat different point of reference for knowledge on the transformations of the contemporary welfare state. Moreover, most analyses, including those taking the street-level perspective, are based on data from Anglo-Saxon countries or the “old” EU member states, characterised by a relatively stable structure of social support institutions and strong social work traditions.

Research methods

To answer the research questions we used quantitative data collected within a project entitled *Conditionality and contractualism in social assistance* funded by the National Science Centre in Poland. The aim of this project, conducted in the years 2015–2018, was to understand the mechanisms behind the use and misuse of conditional measures within social assistance, with particular attention given to social contracts and their effects, including the impact on the nature of the social relations between social workers and clients of social assistance, on the actual empowerment of both social workers and social assistance recipients, and on strengthening the paternalistic attitudes of social workers. The empirical research within the project included 29 in-depth interviews (IDI) with social workers and 30 with recipients in six locations (both rural and urban), analysis of the official reporting data on social assistance from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and a representative CATI (Computer As-

sisted Telephone Interview) survey with social workers who also perform managerial functions in Social Assistance Centres (SAC). In this article, we are using the CATI data and occasionally referring to other components of the project – those that mainly address the attitudes and opinions of social workers, and only to a limited extent allow conclusions about the objectively tangible realities of social welfare centres or the actual effects of social work.

The survey sample consisted of 350 interviews and was representative, accounting for the proportionate representation of SACs in all administrative regions (voivodships) in Poland, the number of social contracts per SAC per year estimated using data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs' reporting system, the value of the local human development index (LHDI; see: Arak et. al., 2012) for the SAC location for the latest year available, and the SAC's borough characteristics (rural or urban, with differentiation of the city size).

In this article, we investigate how organisational factors and the attitudes of social workers toward conditionality impact the perceived empowerment of social assistance recipients. Thus, empowerment is assessed using three dependent variables representing psychological standing, social reintegration, and professional reintegration. The selection of variables follows an observation that empowerment is a complex phenomenon and takes place on various levels of increasing individual skills and competencies.

Psychological empowerment is understood as a set of enablers that increase intrinsic task motivations (Spreitzer, 1995), thus the first dependent variable was based on the question of whether social contracts were effective in strengthening the motivation and self-confidence of a given SACs' clients.

The second dependent variable was based on the question of whether social contracts were perceived as effectively increasing clients' professional capabilities. This relates to the concept used in business and management studies of increasing professional capabilities and control over one's goals, allowing for further professional development.

The third dependent variable was based on the question of whether social capabilities were increased thanks to the use of social contracts. Social capabilities are crucial components of empowerment, strengthening family resources while building resilience and social capital (Mokomane, 2012).

As the literature suggests, individual characteristics, such as education, beliefs, attitudes, and one's perception of organisational goals in community-based units such as social assistance centres, play an important role in understanding the role and meaning of empowerment, and related practices (Speer & Peterson, 2000; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). Therefore, independent, explanatory variables shape the attitudes of social workers towards the role of social welfare institutions and, in particular, towards conditionality and activation; the experience of social workers; the level of their education; the type of social contract, and a SAC's economic environment.

We created an index of attitudes towards conditional benefits and workfare with the following queries: (1) if the respondent agreed that social assistance should teach that receiving assistance always entails certain obligations (on the beneficiaries part); (2) if the respondent agreed that as many benefits as possible should be dependent

upon the active attitude of the beneficiary; (3) if the respondent agreed with the statement that a social contract effectively decreases the number of poor people. Agreement with each of the above statements was given a value of 1. Next, binary variables were transformed into an ordinal variable of the number of statements with which a respondent agreed (values of 0 to 3). The higher the value of the variable, the more pro-workfare and pro-conditional the attitude was. The questions used for creating the index had been used earlier by Rymysza (2011) to assess the level of professionalisation of social work in Poland and the attitudes of social workers towards activation policy, and thus were repeated in our survey.

The attitudes of social workers might be related to the length of their professional careers and the richness of their experience at work. Social workers' experience was approximated by the number of years worked and their education level (higher vs. secondary, or lower education level).

Organisational characteristics and pro-active orientation within a SAC are represented by the type of activities offered to social welfare clients. The analysis of the official reporting data on social assistance (Sowa-Kofta, 2018) shows that the structure of the offer and activation measures (including conditional ones) used in social assistance centres varies across the country and that this differentiation is related to other elements of the institutional characteristics of social welfare centres (number of employees, available resources, amount of financing, etc.); therefore, the structure of activities offered provides a good approximation of a SAC's general proactive (or passive) orientation. Several variables were used to describe the frequency of use of specific activation measures that social contracts typically include and which are available for social workers to apply in accordance with the Act on Social Assistance. Activation measures include professional training, intervention works, public works, active job search via the public employment services (PES), psychological support as well as family, and childcare support. Each type of measure was expressed as a binary variable representing the frequency of using a given type of contract in a SAC (0 – never or rarely; 1 – often or always).

Finally, the external economic and social environment of the SAC was assessed by the unemployment rate and the size of the local settlement (urban vs. rural area); analyses carried out in the above-mentioned project, and based on the official social assistance reporting data prove that these two factors most strongly differentiate the ways in which social assistance centres operate in Poland, including the use of social contracts (Poławski, 2018; Sowa-Kofta, 2018).

Results

The analysis shows that an overwhelming majority of social workers presented an activating attitude, which – at the same time – points to the need for some sort of conditionality. Respondents agreed with the statements that conditionality is the driving force for the effectiveness of social assistance (Table 1). Almost all interviewed (99%) agreed that receiving welfare should be related to obligations, and 93% agreed upon the need for activation as a vital part of reintegration practice in social assistance. So-

cial contracts were evaluated as an effective mechanism for reducing poverty by 41% of respondents. When the conditionality index was analysed, slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) agreed with two of the above statements, and 40% with all three statements.

Table 1. Conditionality index

Agreement with the statement that	Number of responses	%	Index of attitudes towards conditionality and activation*	Number of responses	%
Social assistance should teach that welfare is related to obligations.	346	98.86	1 condition	21	6.00
As many benefits as possible should be dependent upon the clients' active attitude.	326	93.14	2 conditions	187	53.43
Social contract effectively leads to a decrease in the number of care recipients.	143	40.86	3 conditions	140	40.00

* only 2 respondents (0,57%) did not agree with any of the statements

The preliminary analysis included the sample characteristics and structure of the analysed variables. The mean value of the conditionality index was slightly higher among respondents who identified effective empowerment in all three dimensions: psychological, professional, and social (Table 2). Positive attitudes towards psychological and professional empowerment were observed among workers with fewer years of professional experience. Only concerning social empowerment, was the result reversed: the mean number of years of professional experience was higher among those who perceived social contracts as effective in increasing the social capabilities of recipients.

The means of the declared use of almost all types of professional and social reintegration instruments are higher in the case of lower perceived empowerment in almost all analysed dimensions, though differences in means were small. This would indicate that belief in the empowering features of the social contract is more present among those who use this instrument less frequently.

Social workers living and working in areas with higher unemployment rates on average perceive social contracts as more effective, particularly for professional empowerment. Contracts with social assistance beneficiaries are perceived as empowering in all three dimensions slightly more frequently by respondents with higher education and living in urban areas.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample¹

Variable		Psychological empowerment		Professional empowerment		Social empowerment	
		no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Social workers' characteristics	index of attitudes towards conditionality and activation	2.113	2.411	2.155	2.415	2.211	2.386
	number of years worked by the social worker	36.886	22.542	33.843	22.534	22.931	26.652
Content of social contract	vocational training	2.529 ²	2.245	2.854	2.098	2.437	2.258
	intervention works	3.000	2.980	3.079	2.949	2.954	2.996
	public works	3.243	3.170	3.326	3.132	3.161	3.195
	job search via PES	2.471	2.296	2.383	2.316	2.379	2.318
	psychological support	2.829	2.387	2.921	2.316	2.701	2.403
	family and childcare support	2.943	2.549	2.854	2.551	2.885	2.542
Social and economic environment	unemployment rate	9.268	8.511	8.759	8.703	8.831	8.667
	frequencies	N (%)					
Social workers' education	higher	72 (26.28)	202 (73.72)	86 (31.39)	188 (68.61)	84 (30.66)	190 (69.34)
	lower than higher	25 (32.89)	61 (67.11)	30 (39.47)	46 (60.53)	30 (39.47)	46 (60.53)
Urbanisation level	urban	11 (25.00)	33 (75.00)	13 (29.55)	31 (70.45)	14 (31.82)	30 (68.18)
	semi-urban	21 (26.25)	59 (73.75)	25 (31.25)	55 (68.75)	25 (31.25)	55 (68.75)
	rural	65 (28.76)	161 (71.24)	78 (34.51)	148 (65.49)	75 (33.19)	151 (66.81)

¹ Where N stands for the number of responses.

² scale from 1 – always to 4 – never

Logistic regression points out that a higher value of the index of attitudes towards conditionality significantly and strongly correlated to the positive perception of psychological empowerment with the use of the social contract. There is also a positive relationship between the conditionality index and professional empowerment, though the relationship is not as strong.

Table 3. Logistic regression of the correlates of psychological, professional and social empowerment, N=321

Variable	Psychological empowerment			Professional empowerment			Social empowerment					
	Coefficient	Standard error	95% Conf. Interval	Coefficient	Standard error	95% Conf. Interval	Coefficient	Standard error	95% Conf. Interval			
Social workers' characteristics	index of attitudes towards conditionality and activation	0.699**	0.244	1.178	0.240	0.098	1.038	0.221	-0.132	0.734		
	number of years worked by the social worker	-0.001*	0.000	-0.001	0.000	-0.001	0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000		
	social workers' higher education	-0.006	0.363	-0.716	0.315	0.355	-0.381	1.011	0.191	0.325	-0.445	0.827
Content of social contract	vocational training	0.382	0.318	-0.242	1.432***	0.307	0.831	2.035	0.284	-0.156	0.956	
	intervention works	-0.080	0.456	-0.977	-0.132	0.436	-0.987	0.723	0.008	0.405	-0.785	0.801
	public works	-0.392	0.489	-1.349	0.566	0.485	-0.445	1.455	-0.436	0.431	-1.282	0.409
Social and economic environment	job search via PES	-0.198	0.326	-0.837	0.441	-0.885**	-1.542	-0.229	0.295	-0.805	0.350	
	psychological support	0.441	0.341	-0.227	1.120	0.330	0.243	1.536	0.554	0.302	-0.038	1.146
	family and childcare support	0.930**	0.338	0.267	1.594	0.320	0.249	1.502	0.757**	0.295	0.179	1.335
Social and economic environment	unemployment rate	-0.067	0.039	-0.144	0.009	0.039	-0.074	0.077	-0.007	0.036	-0.078	0.064
	urban area	-0.424	0.447	-1.299	0.452	0.442	-1.235	0.495	-0.463	0.399	-1.245	0.319
	semi-urban area	-0.015	0.358	-0.715	0.686	0.354	-0.721	0.666	-0.105	0.324	-0.741	0.530
constants	0.017	0.748	-1.449	1.484	-1.479	0.753	-2.954	-0.004	-0.227	0.687	-1.573	1.120
			R square = 0.1283				R square = 0.2018					R square = 0.0645

Significance level of relations: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The most pronounced relations are between the type of activity measure adopted within the social contract and the perceived empowering effect in a particular dimension (psychological, professional, or social). Activities aimed at family and childcare support, which include social contracts related to counselling, improving school attendance, or ensuring meals at home or school, are positively and strongly related to empowerment and expressed as improving life motivations. Undertaking vocational training, receiving psychological support, and activities focused on childcare and family support are positively related to empowerment in professional capabilities. Conducting a job search via public employment services was found to be negatively related to professional empowerment. Receiving family and childcare support was found to be significantly and positively associated with social empowerment.

Whilst controlling other factors, the experience of social workers as measured by years worked seemed to be insignificant in terms of explaining the perception of empowerment via the use of conditional benefits and activities. Similarly, the economic environment measured by the unemployment rate and urbanisation level was found to be insignificant.

Discussion

The results from our study show a very high level of normative support for conditional welfare arrangements, similar to the results of studies conducted in Nordic countries (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2019). The use of conditional policies in street-level practice is mild as behavioural requirements are set rather in relation to stimulating participation in programmes and activities enabling social, and eventually labour market reintegration rather than sanctions restricting access to social assistance benefits (Sadeghi & Terum 2020). In Poland, sanctions are, in fact, used rarely and reluctantly, and treated by social workers as a last resort – in situations when informal mechanisms of influence and behavioural control have failed (Poławski, 2018). In the realities of social welfare centres in the Nordic countries, sanctioning is not automatically mechanical either – as qualitative studies suggest, and if it takes place at all, it is preceded by a careful and complex interpretation of the client's situation and used in cases of unwillingness, and non-compliance rather than as a punishing mechanism (Vilhena, 2021, p. 427). However, the reasons for the mildness of conditionality seem to be slightly different in Nordic countries than in Poland. In Nordic countries conditionality is perceived from a human rights perspective and driven mostly by care and faith in people, serving as a tool to raise up claimants, and as a natural consequence of the enabling attitude in social work (Sadeghi & Terum, 2020; Vilhena, 2021). Findings of the qualitative part of our project show that in Poland social workers are driven by a need to educate clients and eventually find an agreement with them to persuade them to undertake proposed actions rather than using threats, which are seen as cumbersome by both parties involved (Trochymiak, 2018). Such a consensus-based rationality favours time- and resource-effective strategies for dealing with clients in the context of the constant budget shortages and work overload present in Polish social assistance, while also shaping the practice of poverty management in a way

that is not necessarily consistent with the formal requirements of activation policy and not necessarily consistent with the declarations of the social work ethos (see: Poławski, 2019).

There is a discrepancy between the pro-active and pro-conditional attitude expressed by social workers and the degree to which social work practice is characterised by the low uptake of social contracts. One of the reasons could be the controversial perception that social contracts are a poor inclusion mechanism (Rymsza, 2011). Social contracts are often seen as difficult for the clients, who might not keep to their terms, and for the social workers who need to closely monitor the progress of the empowerment process. In social work practice in Poland, there is a large spectrum of negotiations between the social worker and the client, including assessment of the client's actual potential for reintegration. Street-level practitioners also have a high level of discretionary power and rarely use the ultimate sanction of limiting or withdrawing financial support not only to protect the client and to secure the basic needs of her or his family but also to avoid time-consuming procedures prompting a potential administrative burden and investigation into the reasons for refusing benefits (Rymsza, 2011; Poławski, 2018, Trochymiak, 2018). Thus, the hypothesis that social workers have a proactive and pro-conditional attitude is reflected in a higher degree of perceiving social contracts to be effective and empowering is only partially confirmed, though the values adopted in social work organisations are important. As Rymsza (2011) points out, social work is perceived as a supportive and activating social service, but one which is cautious in assessing whether a client deserves or meets the criteria for support – including conditional benefits. On the other hand, the focus on obligations inherent in the politics of activation and conditionality is often contested by social workers, as it assumes a departure from therapeutic and case-oriented relations with beneficiaries (Ruch, 2010), and is perceived as inconsistent with the professional values and ethos of social work (Bieńko, 2012). Our analysis, in part, confirms these conclusions.

The professional experience of social workers measured in the number of working years seems to influence opinions regarding successful empowerment less than having pro-conditional and pro-activation attitudes, although younger workers tend to express more belief in the potential of the social contract for psychological empowerment. This could mean that social workers entering the profession express higher support for the welfare state, which might arise from a stronger internalisation of professional values and professional identity than older workers. The findings here are in line with a general observation that street-level workers seek congruity between the formal mission of the organisation and their own actions (Meyers & Lehmann Nielsen, 2012); the general support for welfare and activation among social workers is also recognised in the literature (see: Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2007). Differing interpretations of general norms are attributed primarily to the organisational context (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013) or to collective processes rooted in the managerial culture within organisations (Jacobsson et. al., 2020), while less often addressing the issue of frontline workers' professional experience or other individual characteristics. However, it is possible that social workers with more work experience, as with other people-oriented professionals (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) might show professional burnout

symptoms and – consequently – less faith in the purposefulness of their work. Stemming from a long-term work with difficult clients and in understaffed organisations, work that often is underestimated and undervalued in terms of both prestige and remuneration, burnout occurs quite commonly among Polish social workers and is thought to decrease the – actual and perceived – effectiveness of the work, and the chances for client empowerment (Janowska, 2018). Another possible explanation points to differences in the socialisation patterns of social workers. As Kaźmierczak (2012) suggests, patterns of interpreting social problems inherited from the communist era, which are still common in Polish social assistance, including paternalistic orientation and an emphasis on the use of protective measures aimed mainly at satisfying basic needs rather than activating, could be an element of a particular path-dependency shaping the organisational culture of social welfare centres as well as the system of vocational training, and professional socialisation of social workers. Inevitably, this path-dependency has less effect on younger employees, who have been more often brought up on models consistent with the EU patterns of activation policy.

At the same time, social workers tend to be very unified when it comes to planned and implemented activation measures in relation to the expected empowering results of the social contract. Declarations on the type of support provided are consistent with those on the expected type of empowerment resulting from the social contract, whether it increases life motivations, improvement of professional capabilities, or social skills. Support targeted at proper family functioning is related to empowerment in psychological and social dimensions, whilst support for job searches and vocational training is related to professional empowerment. This match can indicate a tendency to maximise the potential positive effects of contracts – despite the low level of belief in the effectiveness of contractual arrangements – and should be interpreted as an expression of a high level of internal organisational coherence. The above finding does not resolve the role of participation and personalising the process of establishing types of support and examining beneficiaries' freedom of choice in the process (Gutiérrez et al., 1995; Kaźmierczak, 2014). It could be that paternalistic attitudes and expectations held by social workers when selecting activities and programmes for reintegrated persons are mirrored in the expected empowerment results (Kaźmierczak, 2014; van Berkel, 2017). Kaźmierczak (2014) argues that the empowering potential of the social contract in Poland might be questioned as it too frequently becomes a social control tool, limiting individual freedom of choice between available types of support or benefits that cannot realistically be consciously evaluated by social welfare clients and truly agreed on between the social worker and the person applying for support.

Indeed, qualitative research undertaken on welfare conditionality in Poland shows that although establishing conditions for a social contract is presented as a participatory process, based more on mutual trust than on formal principles (Poławski, 2019), social workers show rather clear paternalistic tendencies and strongly direct their clients towards solutions, and activities they consider appropriate, and effective in individual situations, while not necessarily providing comprehensive information on the consequences and determinants of alternative solutions. Such practices are justified (by social workers) with the desire to maximise the chances of empowerment and activation (Sowa-Kofta, 2018). Despite the occurrence of paternalistic attitudes,

the use of sanctions seems to be the last choice solution as the rate of benefit refusal is very low, accounting for only 1.3% of all granted social assistance benefits, and these rarely include failure to meet the conditions of the social contract (Poławski, 2018). Thus, conditionality of conduct is, in practice, rarely exercised and social workers tend to believe that their decisions regarding activation measures are the best choice and have an empowering effect. Summing up, the fit between the type of activation mechanism and the empowerment field observed in the study represents some level of justified paternalism and potential empowerment, but with hardly any sanctions involved.

Labour market reintegration and professional empowerment seem to be best addressed within the above quantitative analysis. Numerous measures aimed at labour market reintegration, with the exception of job searching via public employment services, are found to increase the probability of perceived professional empowerment. It is worth highlighting, however, that labour market reintegration is a difficult empowerment process to sustainably achieve. Zalewski (2018) points out that social contracts often lead to employment, which is either temporary or precarious, and thus, typically combined with still receiving social benefits, which in turn, extends the dependency path while not fully reintegrating, and therefore, not meeting the expectations of the poor towards well-being and income. The lack of cooperation between social assistance and public employment services raises questions about the organisational structures and the match of reintegration measures to the actual labour market demand. Types of reintegration mechanisms might be selected by social workers according to their availability and the capabilities of the beneficiaries, not necessarily responding to labour market structures and demand, which is supported by the finding that economic conditions (i.e., the unemployment rate) are irrelevant for the perception of empowerment. One explanation of poor cooperation with public employment services, and the mismatch with labour market demand could be the trade-off between the labour market demand structure, and the SAC aims, with the risk of excluding more vulnerable clients from services when the latter is oriented only on labour market reintegration (van Berkel, 2020 after Ingold, 2018). The result might be also interpreted as a high belief in the empowering effect of one's own actions and limited trust in empowerment resulting from the activities of institutions.

The above study has some limitations. The selection of variables was driven by the content of the questionnaire and it is particularly difficult to express such complex features as conditionality and empowerment with quantitative variables. Also, not all dimensions of empowerment were evaluated equally. The adopted model of the analysis shows numerous correlates of professional and some correlates of psychological empowerment, but still little can be said about the correlates of social empowerment, leaving room for further studies. Although undertaking activities with the aim of social reintegration is a goal for over two-thirds of the social contracts in Poland, empowerment in terms of labour market reintegration seems to be better operationalised and more related to institutional features. As interviews with social managers show, social reintegration is at least as important as labour market reintegration but is frequently reached alongside other activities and as such might be less influenced by the organisational or occupational features tackled within this particular analysis (Sowa-Kofta, 2018). The study, while showing the importance of organisational attitudes, does not

provide information on the structure and characteristics of social work beneficiaries. The database that was analysed did not cover this type of information; however, future work could dig into the problems of empowerment, and particularly, the effectiveness of social work, taking into account the type of social problems that welfare beneficiaries are facing.

Conclusions

In summation, the above research gives an insight into the policy, organisational, and occupational contexts of understanding and implementing conditional benefits in Poland from the perspective of empowerment. From the policy point of view, it shows the importance of the normative acceptance of conditionality in social assistance, which is embedded in welfare policy even if not sufficiently expressed in social work practice. In terms of organisational structures, the analysis points to high-level coherence between the implemented types of conditional activities and expectations towards empowerment. Not all types of empowerment, however, are fully explained by the organisational and policy features included in the study, nor all are equally perceived as important consequences of conditionality.

In general, the research shows that normative support for conditionality and a shared belief in the activating character of social work elevates the potential for empowerment in social work practice. Behavioural conditionality is – in social workers' perception and experience – important for increasing beneficiaries' independence and self-sufficiency when professional capabilities and individual motivations are analysed. At the same time, it seems less important for empowerment in terms of proper functioning within social networks and social environments. In other words, perceived functions of conditionality towards empowerment seem to be selective and, to some extent, limited. Weak relations between a proactive attitude and social empowerment are, however, consistent with what we know about earlier findings on how social welfare has been functioning in Poland since the systemic transformation. Up to date, community social work seems to play a marginal role in social assistance; social workers focus on working with individuals, or – at best – with families and are not, as surveys show, particularly interested in taking up activities and professional roles related to activating local communities or animation, and local planning (Rymsza, 2012). Naturally, they are also not ready to support integrating their clients into social networks within local communities – including the use of conditional measures. The results of our research provide additional justification for possible reforms and actions in this regard. The analysis also points to a need for further research, specifically on empowerment in terms of increasing motivations and social inclusion, which are to a lower extent explained by institutional variables.

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