

Divide and conquer. Welfare clients' competing discourses on the social justice of welfare.

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ABSTRACT

Since 2004 Dutch welfare policies regarding the right to social assistance for the unemployed have been decentralized to the local level leaving the design and implementation to municipalities. Running parallel to this development is an increasing conditionality of the right to social assistance. So far research has paid little attention to how welfare clients experience justice and injustice in an increasingly conditional and decentralized policy landscape. Our qualitative inquiry into the experiences of 55 welfare clients shows that, across municipalities, they use three different, partly conflicting discourses about welfare: welfare as a right, gift, or transaction. Each discourse consists of a set of framing and feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979, 2003) that welfare clients' use to express their experiences of social (in)justice. We found that the most unconditional 'rights discourse' is overshadowed by two more conditional discourses of welfare. First, in a transaction discourse, welfare clients argue that welfare benefits need to be reciprocated. Second, in a gift discourse, welfare is perceived as a gift that should be met with gratefulness. Quite surprisingly, welfare clients' discourses on welfare are in concordance with increased conditionality. Moreover, they apply and impose their framing and feeling rules on other welfare clients and develop negative emotions towards those who break them. Hence, we conclude that increased conditionality has not only changed how welfare clients experience their relationship with the state, but also their perceptions of fellow companions. Increased conditionality produces steep divisions within a group that could ideally share interests and collectively work towards improving their situations.