

Realities of Activation

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The transition from fordist, status-oriented to activating labour market policy regimes is accompanied by extensive research on the effects of such a large-scale policy change. Quantitative research evaluates policy effectiveness primarily in terms of the numbers of people 'activated' or the duration of employment and unemployment spells. Such an approach can declare policies desirable or undesirable from a macroeconomic point of view – but an estimation of what factors the quantitative effects are based on and whether the outcome of the reform is socially sustainable requires knowledge about 'what actually happens' in implementation and how those affected by the new policy deal with the new requirements. My contribution addresses these questions from the perspective of a qualitatively oriented sociology of power relations. In such a perspective, any kind of policy is a specific set of technical devices or 'tools' intended to create a certain kind of social reality – in this case, a 'more flexible' labour market populated by active, entrepreneurial subjects. So what realities *does* an activating labour market policy create? And can these realities be assumed to be socially sustainable? How could we define social sustainability in such a context? Drawing on examples from the evaluation of a German pilot scheme for the integration of unemployed youth, I will show that there is a profound difference between (a) the aims postulated by the political programme of 'activation', (b) the actual practices found at 'ground level' and (c) the requirements perceived by those addressed and their responding strategies.