

Long-term Receipt of German MIS and Active Inclusion

A qualitative analysis of long-term beneficiaries' experiences of German anti-poverty policies and their consequences for benefit dependency

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Abstract:

Against the background of striving for an integrated provision of minimum income benefits, labour market and social services for needy working-age persons in the German minimum income scheme (MIS) this paper investigates German MIS long-term beneficiaries' experiences of anti-poverty policies and their consequences for benefit dependency. On paper the German MIS seems to perfectly reflect the concept of active inclusion. However, national-level research showed that the German MIS predominantly neglects multiple needs of persons receiving benefits for 24+ months (i.e. long-term beneficiaries) due to an increasing work-first orientation, “creaming and parking” effects and a rather weak link to social services. The high share of 70 % long-term beneficiaries among all working-age recipients of German MIS (BA 2013) thus raises the question how German MIS anti-poverty policies support or hinder long-term beneficiaries' abilities to get out of benefit dependency.

By using the theoretical concept of “trajectory” described by Riemann and Schütze (1991: 339) as a multiple-stage experience of disturbance or destruction of “existing structures of social order in biographies”, the paper argues that long-term beneficiaries experiencing such a trajectory due to benefit receipt are forced to redefine their biography in order to restore agency and improve prospects for leaving benefit dependency. Since German MIS provides a certain integration mode (i.e. infinite entitlement, integration of services, personalisation) and a normative modeling (i.e. conditionality) demanding a close cooperation between beneficiary and responsible agency, anti-poverty policies play a decisive role for enabling or hindering a beneficiary to leave such a trajectory. On the basis of ten problem-centred interviews (Witzel

& Reiter 2012) with long-term beneficiaries of German MIS this paper firstly depicts biographical constellations leading to a trajectory within benefit receipt. Individual experiences of German MIS anti-poverty policies are then cohesively presented as interpretive schemes that frame the subjective organisation of beneficiaries' lives. Finally, the outcome of this qualitative explorative study is identifying key aspects of German MIS anti-poverty policies hindering and supporting individual abilities to overcome long-term benefit dependency. These results will be discussed against the backdrop of the integration mode and the normative modelling of the German MIS.

The findings point to the fact that not only events causing benefit dependency (e.g. unemployment, illness etc.) lead to trajectories, but also conditions of German MIS entitlement, i.e. strict conditionality, level of benefits, measures indicating status loss, absence of adequate services, and changes of status within benefit receipt. Regaining control over one's own life (i.e. escaping the trajectory) is then aggravated by discretion regarding services and a lack of information provision on the side of the responsible agencies. Although the ultimate ambition of German MIS is getting beneficiaries out of benefit dependency by an integrated provision of benefits, labour market and social services, it underestimates subjective consequences of its policy design for long-term beneficiaries which ultimately reduces chances to improve prospects for leaving benefit dependency.

Literature:

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