

Delivering integrated employment policies

Cross-sectorial policies in practice

This paper is the initial work on an article and since I am only in the beginning of the writing process, the paper unfortunately appears unfinished and consists of incomplete sections.

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This paper addresses the implementation of complex labor market interventions and the challenges of gaining knowledge about the service delivery system and its producers. How complex interventions are measured and interpreted are a subject of great discussions in Denmark. It is particularly the case for vulnerable cash benefit recipients with problems beside unemployment, where possible long term outcomes are difficult to link causally to the activation programs. In this regard it is my understanding that when addressing the process of implementing integrated activation policies, it is necessary also to include the perspective of not only the street level bureaucrats but also the clients and their understanding of the activation policies, programs etc. Thus the purpose of the paper is to illuminate methodological aspects of analyzing cross-sectorial policies and their implementation by addressing questions as: what activation programs are to be measured (eg. counseling, internships, courses), how to gain knowledge about the continuing progression toward the labor market, when to measure the effects, and how do we even understand outcomes in the changing and complex field of social work in the employment area? These questions will be addressed on the basis of a mix methods research design that combines interviews, observation, progression measurement and register-based outcome analysis in an attempt to elucidate the activation programs' impact on the cash benefit recipients' progress toward the labor market.

A methodological approach to study the consequences of activation programs

Within the past decade major changes have occurred in both Denmark and most of Europe in the field of employment and social cohesion policies. Thus the employment system has undergone numerous institutional changes, where the implementation of new forms of governance, changing policy focus as well as the content and structuring of the service delivery systems are all elements that have had an impact on both the organizational and professional practices. Indeed, the high unemployment rates that currently characterize most European countries have shifted the focus on labor market integration policies. As a consequence, activation policies have been promoted and implemented to a great extent, but with varying results, in Denmark. These changes has resulted in a number of conflicting tendencies and perceptions of practices in the employment field and how these practices should be implemented in accordance with the policy objectives, the employment institutions' resources, the street level bureaucrats' demands in the performance of professional social work and last but not least the clients' expectations of an individualized and holistic approach (Lipsky 1980). Hence, the changes within the employment policies have had an impact on both the organizational, street- and target group-level.

One of the parallel changes that have occurred is the increasing focus on documentation of results and outcomes as well as evaluation of the activation programs. Intrinsic is a specific discursive emphasis on the transition from unemployment to self-sufficiency as a linear process where standardized categories frames the way we talk about change and progression as something that takes place in systematic and successive predictable transitions from activation-ready to job-ready and from job-ready to self-sufficient. However, it has been proven that reality cannot be reflected in such a linear causal explanation model, as studies repeatedly fall short in terms of being able to describe and explain the activation programs' impact on vulnerable cash benefit recipients who have problems in addition to unemployment. The reason is that the preferred data collection methods in this area are not able to capture the complexity and nuances that affects the clients' progress toward the labor market (Maxwell 2004). The preferred methodology is based

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on a continuing notion of a hierarchy of methods in relation to their validity in causal explanatory models. This ranking or hierarchy is based on an assessment of the individual research designs ability to handle the counterfactual problem – i.e. if alternative explanations can be ruled out, it is the studied intervention which causes the outcome. At the top of the hierarchy are the randomized controlled trials, also called RCT, where knowledge is generated from the use of randomly selected trial- and control groups, respectively exposed and not exposed to the intervention being examined. Within evidence terminology RCT is also named the golden standard (Maxwell 2004). However, this approach has a narrow nature as it relates primarily to the documentation of variable correlations, while questions of what works for whom, why and under which circumstances, may be unilluminated (Koivisto 2007). And answering these particular questions is vital in working with complex interventions and vulnerable target groups.

Consequently, we lack knowledge on the impact of the activation programs on vulnerable cash benefit recipients – this being knowledge which it is not possible to gain with the preferred, quantitative methods. Therefore, we need a different methodological approach to analyze the more latent consequences of activities, programs and interventions. This includes an approach that can navigate between the boundaries of single methodological tools, which in isolation, may be able to part of the questions. Currently, the outcome and evidence-concept for this target group watered and empty, because the parameters being used in the research are invalid. This in itself makes it both interesting and relevant to examine how the results of a given activation program can be measured in a qualified way and how this knowledge is brought into play in terms of creating more targeted and qualified interventions. At the same time, knowledge about what works in the activation policies is also valuable in the field of employment and social work in general, as it can help legitimize and visualize the effects achieved by the street-level bureaucrats. In addition, knowledge about which short term goals are important to bring the clients closer to the labor market and hence knowledge of what characterizes good practice, is valuable as regards to raising quality and better practices in activation programs.

The target group of cash benefit recipients is characterized by having one or more problems in addition to unemployment, such as abuse, mental or physical problems and family problems, which means that they are capable of participating in activation programs preparing them for entering the labor market, but not yet ready to obtain a job. In one end of this very broad target group are the clients who simply lack specific skills or qualifications (e.g. mastery of the Danish language) to perform a job, while in the other end is the clients having such large barriers (e.g. a massive alcohol abuse) that they not without a long-term, interdisciplinary effort will be able to enter the labor market. But when self-sufficiency (yes/no) cannot be used as an outcome indicator of the activation programs, there is a need for a different approach to analyze the more latent consequences of the interventions.

To obtain this knowledge, we must necessarily ask questions like; which interventions should be measured (e.g. counseling, courses, traineeships), how do we gain knowledge about the ongoing progression towards the labor market, when should we measure the outcomes and how should we in general understand and interpret these outcomes in the changing, context-sensitive and complex field of social work field in the employment area? To answer these questions it requires an interaction and a dynamic relation between different methods which in combination offers the opportunity to dive into and find ways to new realizations about progression in work readiness. This paper is thus concerned with how a mixed methods research design can study this groups' way through the employment system. The approach was developed as part of my PhD project, which is intrinsic in the nationwide Employment Indicator Project (EIP). The approach of the project is to study a group of clients' progress toward employment by monitoring different interventions' short and long term outcomes - estimated from a number of selected indicators for work readiness – and by conducting a qualitative, longitudinal case study with a small group of clients. Based on the indicators and

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the analysis in the case study, the project aims to make continuous measurements and generate knowledge of a selected group of clients' progression towards the labor market. The overall intention thus is to generate new knowledge and a more professional focus on employment on the employment programs for cash benefit recipients in Denmark. The project will help to qualify the outcome measurements, including clarification of what programs or combination of programs bring the clients closer to the labor market. The knowledge obtained will also help assuring the quality of employment activities for the target group and to strengthen the street-level bureaucrats' professionalism and competencies.

Based on this research question the paper addresses the specific methodological challenges associated with investigating interventions and outcomes in the complex practice in the employment field. I discuss the need to develop a new methodological approach that is able to overcome the hierarchy and the dichotomies that continue to exist in the discussion in the field. The aim is thus to provide a methodological framework that captures the nuances and complexity and at the same time is able to improve our understanding of the work identity of unemployed cash benefit recipients and their progress toward the labor market.

Understanding complex interventions

Traditionally it has been the quantitative researchers' task and declared purpose to seek causal explanations for variable correlations between a given intervention and its outcome. For several reasons, it is a problem that particularly randomized controlled trials have been synonymous with 'the gold standard' in scientifically based research. Assumptions that only a quantitative, experimental methodology can contribute to causal explanations, are based on entrenched and philosophically problematic models of causality (Maxwell 2004). The problem with the traditional understanding of a golden standard is, among other things, the priority of a variable-oriented approach over a process-oriented approach. The former ignores the importance of the context as integrated into the causal processes and at the same time neglecting the role of meaning and interpretive understanding in causal explanations (Maxwell 2004).

Alternatively, in the different traditions within the philosophy of science, a number of recent, realistic and relationally inspired understandings of interventions seek to grasp the complexity and nuances that are present when the interventions get their effects in the field. Maxwell suggests an understanding that is based on a scientific realism, where qualitative methods are justified in research on causal explanations. This approach is referred to as realistic and, according to Maxwell, contributes as a way out of the polarized confrontation between qualitative and quantitative researchers. The realistic, process-oriented approach to causal explanatory models are compatible with, and facilitates some of the basic strengths of qualitative research, in particular the recognition of meaning and interpretation as having explanatory power in our understanding of interventions and their outcomes. At the same time the realistic approach acknowledges the importance of the context surrounding the phenomenon being studied, and does so in a way which not only reduces the context to a set of exogenous variables. It is based on a fundamental understanding of the processes by which an intervention takes place, rather than a simple comparison of situations with the presence and absence of the expected cause. In addition, it legitimizes a concern in relation to the understanding of specific situations and events rather than addressing the general patterns. The difference between the realistic approach and for example a relativist or postmodernists approach is that the realistic approach emphasizes the importance of validity and legitimacy to causal explanations in qualitative research - realism supports the argument that qualitative research can be regarded as scientific research in its fullest sense, and in doing so contribute explicitly developed test ready explanations of the studied phenomenon (Maxwell 2004).

The approach that forms the basis of the understanding of causality in this paper, and should only be shortly to be clarified here is primarily inspired by Juha Koivisto, who, through a confrontation with positivism and

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the understanding of RCT as the golden standard, defines an alternative, relational ontology and methodology for implementation research. Koivisto does this by moving from a linear, one-dimensional understanding of causality to a translation model in which interventions are understood and analyzed as part of an organization's processes and thus cannot be separated from the individuals in the field and cannot be considered as an independent and stable unit. At the same time, Koivisto moves from seeing the social, including structures and context, as having an independent existence, to a performative definition of the social as a continuous consequence of the individuals' actions (Koivisto 2008).

In order to illustrate what is significant for social assistance recipients' work readiness, the individual's life situation should not be regarded as a consequence of the context that surrounds him / her, but '*as an effect (socio -material network) that is performed, co -produced and reproduced in daily activities*' (Koivisto 2008). In Koivisto's point of view, the outcomes of activation programs cannot be explained by the intervention, because the intervention in itself is constituted by and created in collaboration with the activities that take place in field. The starting point therefore becomes a research design that manages to integrate both the individual clients' actions and how they translate and interpret the interventions in their everyday life. The key question thus becomes how activation programs are constituted in the individual's unemployment process, rather than how the programs will determine his or her work readiness. This opens the possibility to explore the outcomes of the employment interventions from a translational approach where the activities carried out in the frontline are considered as chains of relationships, processes and reflections rather than results of variables and causalities of an intervention's impact on the target group.

A mixed methods research design

As indicated above, the target group for EIP characterized by having complex problems that prevent them from being part of the labor market. Much research has studied activation programs, but often the results for this group was muddy and without clear outcomes or recommendations for what works. These studies have predominantly been a mono methodical approach that is unable to capture the complexities and nuances that exist within the target group. In addition, it is more complicated and challenging to obtain knowledge about the outcomes of such programs within the employment field. The reason for this is that social work is an extremely complex field, and the work carried out in the front line is influenced by both the street-level bureaucrats' individual approaches, the decision-making processes in the political and organizational contexts, as well as the complexities and contextual variations that are present in the field (Brodkin 2011, Boaz & Blewett 2010). By choosing a complex research object it is the fundamental understanding in the design that it is necessary to take a variety of methods in use in order to understand and explain the specific contexts and mechanisms present in the encounter between the individual client and the employment system. The starting point is thus not a particular method or tradition within the philosophy of science which the project is enrolled in beforehand. In contrast, the primary focus is the research question and how we with a combination of different methods can achieve a deeper and broader understanding of the research phenomenon that a single method in itself cannot do.

Mixed method as the methodological basis opens up for a recent research tradition, which has been trying to find its place in classic divide between qualitative and quantitative research. This approach (MMR) is defined as *an approach to study social phenomena from more than one methodological tradition and thus more than one way to understand, analyze and reflect on a given phenomenon - from a common purpose of achieving a better understanding of the phenomenon that goes beyond what could be achieved with one method alone* (Greene 2007, Teddlie & Tashakkori 2012, Bazeley & Kemp 2012). This definition draws on several understandings, which are selected from a variety of definitions and attempts to characterize MMR more appropriate, nuanced and accurate than previous attempts. For example, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner identified 19 different definitions that vary both in relation to the question of what is mixed, how and when the methods are mixed, for what purpose they are mixed and from what starting point - that is, whether it is

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the research question or a specific methodological approach (e.g. user participation) that motivates the research (Johnson et al. 2008).

The diversity of definitions of MMR reflects the methodological discussions, wars and continuing disagreements between qualitative and quantitative research, which predates the MMR 's attempt to establish itself as an independent research tradition. It is not the intention to stir up - and thus reproduce - this discussion (and related literature – see for example Guba and Lincoln 1994, Denzin and Lincoln 1998 , Silverman 1993) on the gap between qualitative and quantitative methods, which basically stems of the frozen epistemological understandings of two research paradigms - respectively constructivism and positivism (Bergman 2008). Another characterization of differences between the two methodologies will not only reproduce the gap, but at the same time force me to position myself in relation to the ontological, epistemological and ethical differences associated with each paradigm. In my view, this blocks for a new way of thinking methodology and work to combine different types of methods. In addition such an approach neglects the variations intrinsic in the qualitative and quantitative methodologies - that is, the specific features that characterize for example in-depth qualitative interviews from focus group interviews and observational studies focusing on the interaction between participants.

By rejecting this distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods, I recognize that there may be many ways to mix methods, and therefore it will be more meaningful to see the different methods as part of a multi-dimensional continuum (Bazeley and Kemp 2012:56). To guide and frame the research process around this distinction, I could either choose one of the many alternatives as several researchers have elaborated in recent years. For example with the use of a third, pragmatic paradigm (see Denscombe 2008) where quantitative and qualitative methods are combined, based on needs driven by practical considerations. Or by reconceptualizing the two traditional paradigms (see Bergman 2008), where epistemological considerations are toned down in favor of the use of a set of principles as for example by separating method and analysis or clarifying the inductive and deductive phases of the research process (Bergman 2008:12-13). However, such an approach does not seem appropriate either - or for that matter help clarify of the design, methodological considerations or analytical approaches in the project. On the contrary, classification in a particular understanding or typology will add further to the complexity of the project design, rather than simplifying the phenomenon, which is exactly what typologies are supposed to do (Guest 2012).

Thus, the choice of design and methodology in the project rely on the specific research question and the premise that the complexity and fluidity of the phenomenon necessitates a multi- methodological approach in order to achieve a deeper, broader and more nuanced understanding of cash benefit recipients' progression towards the labor market (Greene 1989, Guest 2012). This is related to my understanding of complex interventions, where a more in-depth perspective on the translation processes taking place in the field is needed to get closer to illustrate the problem. This approach is inspired by Guest 2012, who rejects the simple classification, typologies, etc. which exists in the MMR literature - and which is not helpful when you are dealing with a complex and iterative design in larger, more complex projects (Guest 2012). Guest suggests that instead of having the entire project as a reference point, the focus shifts to the point of interface, which refers to any point in the project where two or more data sets are mixed or connected in some way. This shift in language will eliminate the difficult attempt to describe the entire project based on an inadequate terminology and at the same time it will offer an alternative way of describing the inherent complexity and the liquidity that a research project of this nature has (Guest 2012:6).

According to Guest it is only relevant to relate to two dimensions in the research process; the *timing* and *purpose* of the method combination in order to characterize a project's design. The reason is that these two dimensions permeates all existing typologies and together have enough descriptive power to portray the

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diversity of mixed methods designs (Guest 2012). The timing is critical because it describes when the individual data collection method is used in preference to others, and it specifies when each method components are interdependent. The purpose of the method combination represents the reason for connecting or mixing data at different stages of the research process, and is critical to creating transparency in the design and the data collection itself (Guest 2012:7). How the relationship between the timing and purpose of the combination method unfolds in this project will be made clear in the following. Thus, for the time being, it should be made clear that the choice of the research question as the focal point in the project design, as well as the rejection of any attempt to make an artificial classification in various typologies and classifications means a continuing openness to the complexity and the liquidity which characterize the phenomenon. It also means, that I, as a researcher, avoid undergoing a state of schizophrenia, where it is impossible to maintain a clear position, and where the way in which the various methods are mixed, will be fragmented, inconsistent and at worst moves away from the field of study (Denscombe 2008).

The mixed methods

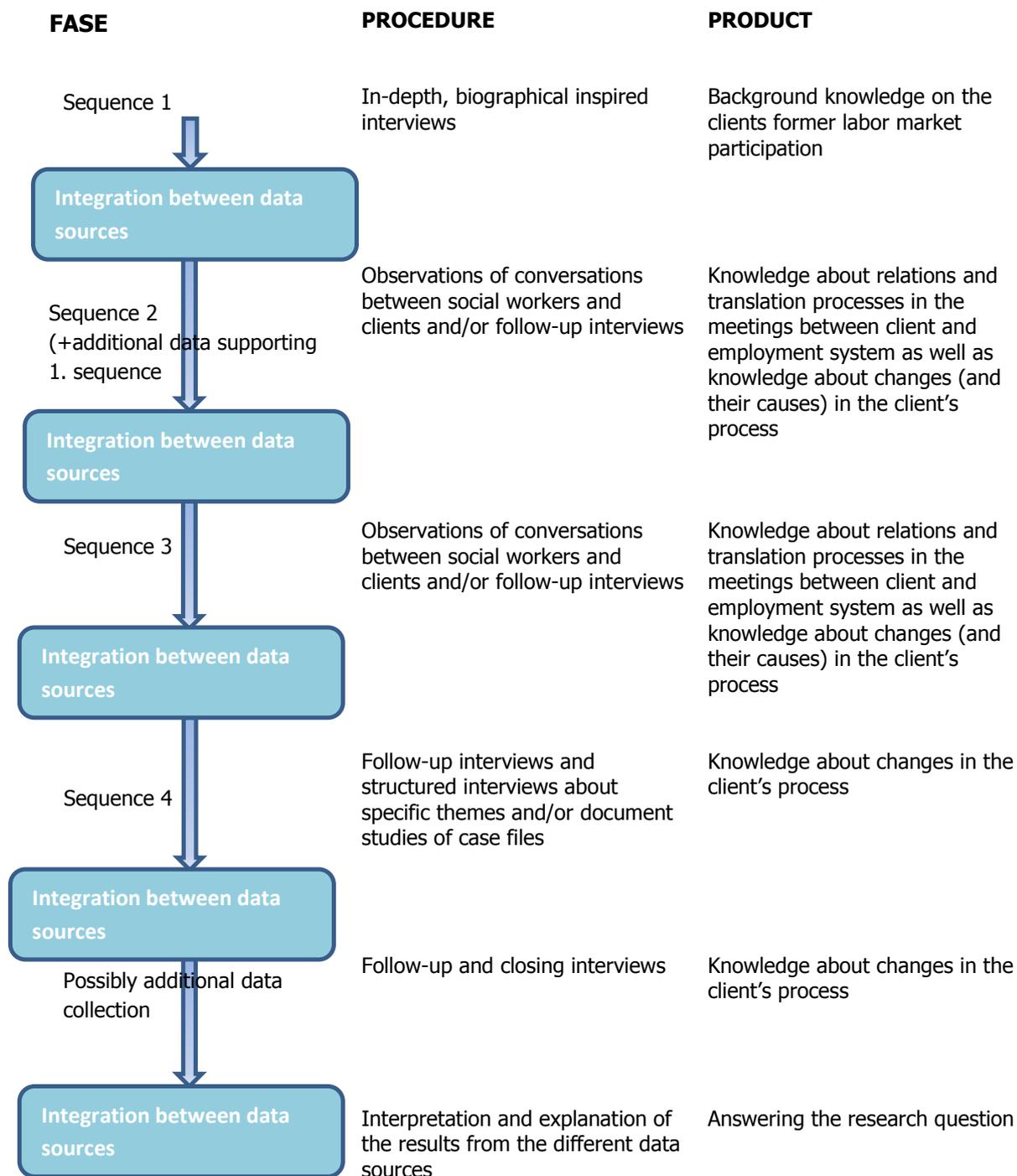
Intrinsic in EIP is the assumption, that progression in work readiness is a comparison necessary to make as regards the pathway to employment for the clients in the specific target group. To investigate this, it is not sufficient to measure the progression in selected indicators (e.g. health, social competencies, motivation). On the contrary, this knowledge is tied to the relationships, processes and mechanisms that exist in cash benefit recipients' interaction with the employment system, the frontline and the street-level bureaucrats. In addition to the outcome measurements and the continuous measurements on the indicators of labor market readiness, it is therefore necessary to include the cash benefit recipients' own perspective on the employment programs and activities, including their actions, responses to interventions and the practices that take place and influence their work readiness. By combining progression measurements of about 5000 clients and qualitative case studies of about 25 clients, the project therefore intends to focus on the changes and movements in the labor market readiness that is being created in cash benefit recipients' meeting with the employment system, and on this basis to generate insights the areas that are important to address in order to achieve knowledge about this phenomenon. The primary focus of the PhD project is the qualitative case studies, including interviews and observations, but the other data collection activities will also be involved, as they are a prerequisite for the analyses of the overall problem ; *what impact does the activation programs have on cash benefit recipients' progression towards the labor market?*

The purpose of EIP is both to examine the relationship between a set of selected indicators of work readiness - with the aim of ensuring quality and evaluate the outcome of activation programs and in addition, the objective is also to highlight what is essential to focus on in the employment system's ability to support the clients' progression toward the labor market. The methodology used in EIP thereby seeks a dialectic between quantitative outcome measurements, progression measurements and qualitative case studies, which all flows into and over each other in an attempt to create holistic and in-depth knowledge of the work readiness among clients in the target group. This approach is inspired by Bergman's understanding that how data will be collected and analyzed must largely rely on the consistency created between the understanding data in the context of the specific research questions, the project's purpose and rationale. Thus, from a methodological point of view, it does not make sense to appoint an approach more valid and scientific than others (Bergman 2008:10). Thus, the object of the project design is the individual data units and the continuing combination during the research process, resulting in a much more precise description of the methodology and data collection process than a typology of the overall design could contribute with. The figure below is a visual model of the data collection process, which clarifies the data units, where and when data is combined and for what purpose.

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Figure 1



The model portrays the sequences in the research process, specifies the data collection and analysis procedures and lists the process and product of the individual sequences (Ivankova et al. 2005:16-17). Thus it is visible that the data collection is structured around a minimum of four sequences which alternates between using in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews and/or observations. In addition there might be a further data component consisting of a review of case journals. However, for the time being, it is uncertain

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whether this component will be included in the final data collection. Each sequence contribute with knowledge, illustrated to the right, and in the exchange and continuous integration with the other methods in the project (i.e. progression measurements and outcome measurements) forms the following sequences. This is with the exception of the first sequence, which has the purpose to gain insight into each client's previous labor market experience and his or her current situation, and thus using only the interview method. The model visualizes thus both the individual sequences and the combination points between the various phases.

Besides portraying the research process, the model clarifies the points of integration between methods. This element of integration is particularly central to MMR studies because it captures the essence of why to use MMR design and because the choice of integration approach will legitimize and justify the conclusions which can be drawn. In the MMR literature there is great disagreement on how integration is defined, depending on which MMR tradition you belong to. In this article I am inspired by Ivankova et al.'s definition, which describes integration as the phase or phases of the research process, where the mixing or integration of the various methods is taking place - and it could be anything from the beginning of the study, in interpretation phase or continuous along the process (Ivankova et al. 2005:11). As with the design questions discussed above, we run into a plethora of typologies - for example Tashakkori and Teddlie identified over 40 different approaches that draw on a wide variety of typologies, characteristics and concepts in the description of the individual study (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). In an attempt not to start a hopeless discussion of how to place this project in one of these typologies and traditions, it can simply be stated, that the integration takes place during the data collection in the interfaces between the sequences where the results and knowledge is continuously integrated in the following sequences. At the same time integration also takes place in the analysis, where the empirical data is when the results from the different empirical sources are compared and interpreted in its entirety (Creswell & Plano Clark, Greene et al.). The argument for this way of integrating the different methods is also found in the research question, which in its complex and fluid nature requires ongoing interaction between the different methods. This is included in a dialectical process that informs, nuances and inspires the further sequences.

A single classification may, however, in this context, help to clarify the research process. This classification, using metaphors to describe the research process, may facilitate the understanding and communication of the MMR approach (Bazeley & Kemp 2012:56). The metaphors range from mosaics and jigsaw puzzles as a metaphor for integration processes in which each method plays a key role in the whole project, to metaphors as sprinkling or stirring, picturing the type of designs that combines methods to 'add a little extra spice to the taste of the soup' or 'sprinkle some M&M's on top of the ice-cream to make it look nice delicious'. The metaphor that contributes to the understanding of the integration in this project is *conversation*. Conversation can be seen as a picture of how elements in the study can inform or cause other elements, for example to initiate further empirical data collection. As the model in the figure above illustrate repeated exchanges between the methods both initiates new perspectives and greater in-depth knowledge in the research process. Conversations moves back and forth between two or more partners, sometimes one is more dominant than the other, and often the conversation contains various stimuli such as strong opinions or provocations, which calls for a response from the partner(s). Central to this is that each partner maintains its own identity despite the fact that the shared ideas and communication initiate modifications. Thus, conversations are iterative when contradictions become apparent and new, further exploration opportunities are necessitated to obtain in-depth knowledge of the contradictions (Bazeley & Kemp 2012:67-68).

The conversation metaphor illustrates - with reference to the initial description of the gap between quantitative and qualitative methods - that researchers belonging to the different methodological paradigms must be able to talk to each other. According to Maxwell this presupposes that researchers learn to speak each other's languages, including developing an understanding and respect for each other's logics and

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practices, so that the interpretation process results in hybrid understandings. This will provide a common understanding based on equality and complementarity rather than hierarchy and attempted domination of both parties. How this unfolds in this project will describe further below.

A description of the different methods (these being in-depth interviews, observations, progression measurements and outcome measurements) is to be elaborated together with an empirical example of the integration process.

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