



Activation: a thematic and conceptual review

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Abstract

Activation as a social policy topic has been investigated since the late 1990s and continues to be popular in academic analysis and discourse. In this review, we highlight the wide range of research aims and themes covered within relevant publications. We also identify a considerable degree of conceptual inconsistency and ambiguity across the literature. Informed by methodological considerations, we conclude by suggesting a parsimonious root concept of activation which would allow for a more consistent and less ambiguous application within and across different levels of analysis.

Keywords

activation, social policy research, activation policy, social policy concepts, active welfare state

Introduction

Just as in other academic domains, social policy scholarship and discourse is built on a range of key concepts. Apart from notable exceptions, however, (for example, [Béland and Petersen, 2014](#); [Daly, 2021](#)), there has been surprisingly little reflection on the nature and solidity of concepts which have become cornerstones of national and cross-national social policy analysis. Activation is such a key concept. After the shift towards supply-side labour market policy in many European countries during the 1990s, it became a firmly established topic in academic research and also political communication, especially at EU level. However, as has been pointed out before (for example, [Eichhorst et al., 2008](#); [Van Berkel and Møller, 2002](#)), there is considerable diversity in what activation actually means. Reference is often made to benefit systems becoming more ‘employment friendly’, or linking more closely

so-called ‘passive’ with ‘active’ elements of labour market policy. Such definitions are rather broad, leaving plenty of room for interpretation and operationalization. As a result, as we show in this review, there is indeed a noticeable lack of conceptual clarity within research on activation.

We start with a brief thematic overview of the academic literature on activation published in the past 25 years or so. We then move to the conceptualization of the term, demonstrating a considerable degree of ambiguity and inconsistency. Finally, following methodological suggestions ([Collier and Mahon, 1993](#); [Sartori, 1970](#)), we put forward a ‘root concept’ ([Mair, 2008](#)) which may provide a more solid foundation for the analysis and comparison of

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various aspects of activation within and across different levels of abstraction.

The landscape of activation

Based on a systematic literature search, we have reviewed texts which explicitly refer to the term 'activation' in the title, abstract or key words as criteria for inclusion. Within the (broadly defined) field of Social Policy, we identified about 200 academic articles in relevant peer reviewed journals, including six special issues (featuring at least three articles on activation per issue). We also reviewed about 90 book chapters in 19 edited volumes. The period of investigation spans from 1995 to 2020.¹

Disregarding some overlaps, it is possible to distinguish eight different themes and aims within the literature on activation. Some of those aims were more prominent earlier on, others featured more strongly in recent years. For example, in the early 2000s, several analyses mapped trajectories of policies on activation. At times those were focused on national developments (for example, [Gilbert and Van Voorhis, 2001](#); [Lødemel and Trickey, 2001](#)), but comparative accounts were also common, for example, contrasting two or more countries in single articles within a wider context of collaborative research on activation per se (for example, [Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004](#)), or directed at particular groups, such as lone parents (for example, [Knijn et al., 2007](#)). Nordic countries (for example, [Johansson and Hvinden, 2007](#)) and Denmark in particular (for example, [Jørgensen, 2009](#)) featured prominently, at times as comparators to developments elsewhere in Europe. Somewhat later, research discussed national activation trajectories as set within wider changes of labour market policy (for example, [Clasen and Clegg, 2011](#)) or concentrated on particular aspects, such as sanctions ([Knotz, 2019](#)). Of course, some publications did more than describe policy developments by, for example, also covering issues of implementation and evaluation (for example, [Eichhorst et al., 2008](#)). Nevertheless, tracing national policy change has remained a distinctive aim throughout (for example, [Lødemel and Moreira, 2014](#)), often adopting a particular angle, for example, exploring instances of policy convergence ([Serrano Pascual, 2004](#)).

A second academic preoccupation has been the classification of models of activation, often aimed at developing typologies of national approaches. [Torfing \(1999\)](#) was one of the first authors to do this by contrasting a distinctive Danish approach with what he regarded as American and British welfare policy. The identification of dichotomous approaches has been common, with a multitude of labels suggested, such as 'liberal' versus 'universalistic' ([Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004](#)), 'narrow' versus 'wide' ([Lind and Møller, 2006](#)), 'work first' versus 'human capital' ([Larsen, 2005](#)) or 'enabling' versus 'demanding' ([Knotz, 2019](#)). Other typologies have focused on particular dimensions of activation ([Aurich, 2011](#)), target groups ([Kowalewska, 2017](#)) or policy instruments, such as incentives ([Dinan, 2019](#)). At times, activation has featured as one dimension within a broader typology, for example, of welfare states ([Danforth, 2014](#); [Marchal and Mechelen, 2017](#)). Some classifications acknowledged that variation may be found not only across but also within countries, as welfare states incorporate different types of activation within their domestic policy portfolio ([Eichhorst et al., 2008](#)). The recognition of activation policies containing different elements, such as coercion as well as support, has become more explicit in recent years (for example, [Van Berkel et al., 2018](#)).

Third, there are publications aimed at analysing the causes of activation policy. At times, the focus has been on a particular country (for example, [Lind and Møller, 2006](#)). More common are attempts to assess the determinants for cross-national variation in the timing or scope of activation policies, pointing to influences such as institutions (for example, [Clasen and Clegg, 2003](#)), problem pressure (for example, [Lindsay and Mailand, 2004](#)), ideas and normative beliefs ([Weishaupt 2013](#)), public attitudes ([Vis, 2009](#)) or class politics ([Wiggan, 2015](#)). Within the same sub-set of literature, there are some contributions which have analysed the influence of international actors, such as the OECD and the EU in particular. In this review we do not include policy documents on activation released by these organizations, restricting ourselves to academic research and publications instead, some of which have assessed the impact of supranational organizations on

domestic policy development, and vice versa (for example, [Casey, 2004](#); [Weishaupt, 2013](#)).

A very different and more interpretative approach has put activation in the context of broad transformations within welfare states, often at a macro-sociological level. Prominent here are studies which have viewed the adoption of activation policies as indicative of a fundamental redefinition of citizenship ([Evers and Guillemard, 2012](#); [Goul Andersen et al., 2005](#)), or 'state-citizen relationship' ([Clarke, 2005](#); [Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2014](#)). Others have characterized activation policies as expressions of neo-liberal and paternalist tendencies ([Whitworth, 2016](#)), as curtailing 'individual autonomy' ([Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011](#)), or transferring risk protection from the collective to the individual ([Eversberg, 2016](#)).

A narrower and more evaluative focus has been adopted by studies assessing the effects of activation. Of course, there is a long tradition of estimating the impact of active labour market policy (ALMP), which includes employment services, placements, training, job creation and so on (for example, [Card et al., 2010](#)). By contrast, there was relatively little evaluative research on activation during the first wave of publications in the early 2000s. Exceptions include [Van Oorschot and Abrahamson \(2003\)](#) and [Larsen \(2005\)](#). More recently, evaluative studies have become more common. Some have focused on labour market outcomes for particular groups, such as young unemployed people ([Grimmer and Hobbins, 2014](#)), lone parents ([Millar and Crosse, 2018](#)) or particular aspects of activation, such as benefit sanctions (for example, [Ahmad et al., 2019](#); [Diop-Christensen, 2015](#)). Others have concentrated on the performance of particular activation schemes, such as the Norwegian qualification programme ([Ohls, 2017](#)) or on regional approaches, such as in Lombardy ([Trivellato et al., 2017](#)).

All of the above publications revolved around labour market integration as key evaluative criterion. A separate strand of the evaluative literature has assessed the impact of activation on aspects beyond employment. Again, there are only a few examples during the early period (for example, [Strandh, 2001](#)). More recently however the wider effect of activation on particular groups has become a more prominent topic, including studies with a focus on the long-term

sick ([Hetzler, 2009](#)), people with disabilities ([Etherington and Ingold, 2012](#)), on wellbeing ([Carter and Whitworth, 2017](#)) or aspects of mental health ([Williams, 2021](#)). Within this strand of research, there has also been an increasing interest in the role caseworkers play ([Senghaas, 2020](#); [Van Berkel et al., 2018](#)) and in assessing activation programmes from the participant perspective (for example, [Girardi et al., 2019](#)).

Finally, there are two different sets of publications which have not concentrated on activation per se, but on particular aspects, or have used activation mainly for illustrative reasons. Prominent within the first strand is research on policy implementation. An enduring theme has been the analytical emphasis on governance of activation ([Minas et al., 2018](#); [Van Berkel and Borghi, 2007](#)), as well as decentralization ([Van Berkel et al., 2012](#)). The role of street-level organizations has attracted considerable attention ([Brodkin and Marston, 2013](#)), and also the issue of coordinating benefit delivery and labour market measures ([Heidenreich and Rice, 2016](#)) or service integration ([Champion and Bonoli, 2011](#)).

In a second strand of publications, activation has essentially featured as background or context. For example, numerous studies have examined public attitudes towards rights and obligations of benefit claimants (for example, [Laenen and Meuleman, 2019](#)), explored the issue of 'deservingness' ([Senghaas, 2020](#)) or examined processes of outsourcing or marketization employment services ([Benish, 2014](#); [Finn, 2010](#)). Arguably, activation has not been at the centre of such analyses but has served as an apposite policy example.

In sum, the theme of activation has featured in multiple ways in social policy scholarship, with empirical, theoretical and normative analyses aimed at one, and sometimes more than one, of the research aims identified. Given its prominence and endurance as a research theme it seems appropriate to focus on ways in which activation has been conceived in social policy literature, and whether a robust conceptual basis can be identified which allows for constructive academic communication. However, as a preliminary step, we need to briefly reflect on some general methodological aspects of conceptualization.

The importance of conceptualization

Like any other scientific field of research, the study of social policy utilizes a particular language and relies on basic concepts (Béland and Petersen, 2014). Some of those concepts may be broad in nature (for example, citizenship), others more narrow (for example, unemployment insurance), some theoretically derived (for example, decommodification), others more empirical (for example, replacement rate). Some are primarily used in academic analyses, others in political discourse, and some in both, such as social investment, flexicurity or activation. While it is interesting to explore the origins and development of key social policy concepts (for example, Petersen and Petersen, 2013), in this section we discuss more principally why concepts matter, what the basic problems of poor conceptualizations are and how those may be addressed, before reviewing the ways in which activation has been conceptualized in social policy scholarship.

Drawing on Sartori's (1970; 1984) classic reflections, we can identify three elements related to a concept: the term or label given to it, its properties or defining attributes (intension), and the cases it can be applied to (extension). For example, in social policy scholarship we may use the label 'welfare state' for a country which guarantees its citizens a minimum level of pension income, access to healthcare and other specified types of social protection (intension), placing it within a limited group of countries who do the same (extension). Related to their intension and extension respectively, the formation and use of concepts in academic communication is faced by two particular challenges: the need for clarity and consistency on the one hand and the ability to 'travel' on the other.

Concepts are dynamic, as terms and their meaning tend to change over time (for example, Sauthier, 2013). Concepts can also be contested, with disputes potentially leading to refinement or re-specification. Nevertheless, core concepts need to be shared, or at least accepted, by other authors. If not, there is the danger of scholars operating with very different understandings of a particular concept, thereby hampering constructive academic exchange and analytical progress. Especially for empirical research, the

absence of a shared meaning or minimal definition of a basic concept may lead to what Sartori (1984: 35) calls 'collective ambiguity', that is, a situation in which each scholar attaches their own meaning to a particular term. Mair (2008) refers to the author Lewis Carroll's character of Humpty Dumpty who declared 'when I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less'. In other words, a fundamental source of ambiguity in concept formation is the notion that a particular concept 'can enjoy *any* meaning whatsoever' (Mair, 2008: 190; emphasis in original).

It should be emphasized that the need for clarity and consistency is crucial in academic analysis. In contrast, a certain level of ambiguity may actually be desirable in other domains. In public policy formation for example, ambiguous concepts may be politically expedient (Palier, 2005), although not invariably (Clasen, 2020). Thus, when reflecting on conceptualization, it is important to acknowledge differences in parameters based on scientific criteria versus, for example, those in political communication (Jenson, 2015).

A second major challenge in the use of concepts is the ability to travel. The 'effort to achieve broader knowledge through analysing a wider range of cases' (Collier and Mahon, 1993: 846) is a key aim, especially in comparative social research. However, it is often difficult to transfer concepts from one setting to another without losing the exactness or precision of conceptual meaning. The danger here is that the 'larger the world, the more we have resorted to conceptual stretching, or conceptual straining, that is, to vague, amorphous conceptualizations' (Sartori, 1970: 1034). A classic response to this problem has been Sartori's (1970) 'ladder of abstraction' with concepts situated at lower or higher levels of generality.² Concepts which are defined by a large number of attributes, and thus necessarily covering only a limited number of cases, are located towards the bottom of the ladder. The aim of extending the coverage can be reached by 'moving up the ladder', making a concept more abstract by reducing the number of properties.

In social policy, the above may be applied to the concept of 'welfare state', for example. Moving down the ladder of abstraction, it has become common to differentiate between particular sub-types, each with a

specific set of properties (liberal welfare states, conservative welfare states, and so on), thus identifying welfare states ‘with adjectives’, to paraphrase [Collier and Levitsky \(1997\)](#). Moving in the opposite direction (ascending the ladder) enables comparisons not only between cases of the same type but also across cases. For example, we can compare ‘welfare states’ with ‘non-welfare states’ by making use of the more abstract and inclusive concept of ‘welfare society’, which has fewer attributes than ‘welfare state’, thereby allowing comparisons of forms of social protection based on legal rights with, for example, those attached to occupational status or informal sources of solidarity.

Of course, moving up the ladder of abstraction implies a loss of differentiation and there may not be much to be said ‘beyond what is intended to delimit the scope of enquiry in theoretical terms’ ([Mair, 2008: 188](#)). In contrast, towards the bottom of the ladder, where the number of properties is high, discussion and analysis may remain somewhat descriptive. As [Mair \(2008: 188\)](#) claims, it is thus concepts with a medium extension as well as intension at the middle layers where ‘theory building and analysis...is often at its most interesting and challenging’. It is also within the middle layers where a ‘root concept’ may be situated ([Collier and Levitsky, 1997](#)), with differentiation ‘down the ladder of abstraction’ and with a different, more encompassing, term and concept to be applied when moving up the ladder.

Activation as a concept in social policy research

How has ‘activation’ been conceptualized in the existing social policy literature, and is it possible to apply [Sartori’s \(1970\)](#) ladder of abstraction? From the outset, it can be stated that the academic literature on activation as a whole reveals a considerable degree of conceptual inconsistency and ambiguity. Moreover, looking back over a period of 25 years or so shows that there has been little progress towards greater clarity over time. A few examples may suffice to illustrate this.

A major source of confusion arises from the ways in which activation has been conceptualized in relation to ALMP. Some scholars regard ALMP as one element of activation ([Barbier, 2005](#); [Goul Andersen](#)

[et al., 2005](#); [Lødemel and Moreira, 2014](#)), others do exactly the opposite, that is, conceiving activation as a sub-section of ALMP ([Jørgensen, 2009](#); [Strandh, 2001](#)). Moreover, while most authors consider ALMP and activation as conceptually distinct, some equate activation either with a particular labour market measure (for example, [Breidahl and Clement, 2010](#); [Maron and Helman, 2017](#); [Wroblewski, 2004](#)), or with ALMP per se, operationalized through expenditure (for example, [Vis, 2009](#); [Danforth, 2014](#)). At times, a semantic distinction is retained by using the terms ‘activation programmes’ for ALMPs and ‘activation policy’ for activation itself ([Lødemel and Moreira, 2014](#)), although it is not obvious what these terms add to the more widely used terms of ALMP and activation.

Another example is the relationship between activation and workfare. For many authors, workfare and activation are conceptually distinct (for example, [Larsen, 2005](#)). Others however equate activation with workfare ([Lind and Møller, 2006](#)), or the European version of US workfare ([Brodkin and Marston, 2013](#)), where workfare refers to ‘work-for-benefit’ programmes. Some consider workfare as a particular type of activation (often contrasted with ‘human capital’ or ‘enabling’ forms of activation; for example, [Eichhorst et al., 2008](#)), but the opposite can be found too, that is, activation conceived as a particular form of workfare (for example, [Lødemel and Trickey, 2001](#)). Further instances could be listed. Most authors consider benefit retrenchment as part of activation (for example, [Van Berkel and Møller, 2002](#); [Williams, 2021](#)), for example, but others do not (for example, [Torfing, 1999](#)).

It should be acknowledged that there are sub-discourses in which the concept of activation has been applied somewhat more consistently. The previously discussed focus on governance, implementation and delivery of activation represents such a thematic sub-field. Within much research on this theme, there has been a relatively consistent conceptualization (for example, [Heidenreich and Rice, 2016](#); [Van Berkel and Borghi, 2007](#); [Van Berkel et al., 2018](#)). However, it could be argued that within this and other sub-discourses, activation itself has been largely illustrative of what are conceptually more central areas of interest, such as, in this

case, street-level implementation, service delivery or decentralization.

Adding to conceptual inconsistencies across the literature as a whole, there is a problem of ambiguity. As discussed, some analyses have conceived activation as paradigmatic or illustrative of broad societal changes in the principles governing the functioning of the modern welfare state or contemporary society more generally (for example, [Serrano Pascual and Magnusson, 2007](#)). The concept of activation here is often not defined independently but expressed through sociological notions such as ‘citizenship’ – including the changing ‘state–citizenship’ relationship (for example, [Clarke, 2005](#); [Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2014](#)), ‘active citizenship’ (for example, [Goul Andersen et al., 2005](#)) or ‘social citizenship’ (for example, [Meade, 2018](#)) – ‘individualization’ (for example, [Eversberg, 2016](#)) or ‘individual autonomy’ ([Bothfeld and Betzelt, 2011](#)). While operating with a broad definition of a concept is principally unproblematic, it is not always clear in this branch of the literature if the concept of activation is distinct from, or an element of, these wider concepts, and, if so, how. This sets them aside from other studies which also contextualize activation within processes of societal change, but which retain a clearly distinct concept of activation (for example, [Siim, 1998](#)).

The above indicates that a solid conceptualization needs to involve an explicit specification of activation on the one hand and of related concepts on the other. Often this is lacking, resulting in blurred boundaries between activation and neighbouring concepts, at times interchangeably used with activation (for example, ‘welfare-to-work’, ‘active turn’, ‘active society’, ‘activating welfare state’). The result can be one kind of ambiguity (several terms are being used for the same meaning), compounding the problem of ‘collective ambiguity’ ([Sartori, 1984](#)) mentioned previously, that is, multiple meanings attached to the same term.

Towards a root concept of activation in the ‘ladder of abstraction’

Despite a considerable lack of conceptual clarity in the literature as a whole, we would argue that it is principally possible to adopt a common understanding

of activation. Activation implies a shift in the balance between rights and obligations on the part of benefit claimants towards a stronger engagement with and participation in policies aimed at labour market entry, including job search activities, training or subsidized employment. Thus, central for the concept of activation is the linkage between benefit entitlement on the one hand and behavioural requirements of job search conditionality on the other. In other words, the concept of activation rests on the articulation between claiming benefits and participation in labour market programmes. Thus, a change in the rules governing benefit entitlement (on its own) would be conceptually different from activation, as would be an increase in the budget for ALMP, or reallocation between its elements such as between job creation and training.

Our suggestion is not new, but in line with ways in which activation has been understood in some of the literature (for example, [Clasen and Clegg, 2007](#): 174; [2011](#): 9; also [Bonoli, 2013](#): 33). It also reflects some of the early research in Denmark (for example, [Rosdahl and Weise, 2001](#)), where the ‘active line’ had a long history, but activation was seen as new and explicitly defined obligations on the part of unemployed benefit claimants. It is deliberately narrower than what has been suggested in some other seminal publications on the topic, however, which have extended the meaning of activation to policies aimed at removing options for labour market exit (such as early retirement schemes) or ‘pull factors’ which make employment more rewarding, such as minimum wages (for example, [Eichhorst et al., 2008](#); [Weishaupt, 2010](#); [2013](#)).

We would argue that a more parsimonious meaning of activation is better suited as a ‘root concept’ located somewhere in the middle rung of the ‘ladder of abstraction’ ([Sartori, 1970](#)), allowing conceptual differentiation (moving down the ladder), as well as generalization (moving up the ladder). For example, differentiation can be achieved by analysing particular aspects of activation policy (for example, benefit sanctions), or programmes targeted at particular benefit recipients (for example, social assistance claimants). In fact, much of the existing literature on activation resembles a form of differentiation of the root concept. There is no conflict between activation at these sub-levels and the root

concept, as long as the joint focus on benefit entitlement and engagement in labour market integration efforts remains central.

As for generalization, that is, moving up the ladder of abstraction, it is important to distinguish between two variants in the existing literature. As discussed, some authors equate activation with broader concepts (such as transformation of citizenship, individualization, curtailing autonomy and so on), potentially contributing to the problem of ambiguity. On the other hand, there are authors who have treated the concept of activation as essentially in line with the basic understanding proposed here, allowing it to be embedded within a more general (higher ranked) concept. For example, Bonoli (2013) specifies and defines activation as separate from (but an element within) a broader set of 'active social policy', which also covers childcare, tax credits and various active labour market programmes (see also Van Aerschot, 2003). In principle, a similar conceptual (and semantic) distinction could be made between activation and 'social investment', with the former conceived as a sub-set of the latter (Gubrium et al., 2017; Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011). We would argue that such a practice reduces ambiguity as it retains the core meaning of activation located within a conceptually hierarchical framework.

Conclusion

Activation has become a well-established and enduring topic of social policy research. We have identified various research themes and trends since the late 1990s, such as an increasing attention attached to assessing the impact of activation, both in terms of employment and non-employment related aspects, but waning interest in developing typologies of national regimes, or in determining causes of policy development. As a whole, however, judging by the number of annual publications in recent years, research on activation seems here to stay. This is also underlined by the fact that for some years now the annual number of publications on related concepts (for example, 'conditionality') have increased but not supplanted texts on activation.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable lack of conceptual clarity across the academic literature.

This may be because activation has served as a multi-dimensional or 'umbrella' concept (Mair, 2008) within academic and also policy arenas, associated with a wide range of themes which have been subjected to various types of theoretical and empirical analyses. However, conceptual ambiguity is less due to the use of a narrower versus a broader meaning of the term. Instead, as discussed, the problems are a lack of specification (or inconsistency) of its defining characteristics, and an unclear relationship between activation and related concepts, as well as the problem of 'collective ambiguity' (Sartori, 1984).

Addressing the challenges of ambiguity and the need to be able to 'travel', we have suggested a concept of activation which builds on earlier parsimonious meanings of the term. We consider it to be able to function as a mid-level or 'root concept', allowing for differentiation but also generalization and incorporation in broader concepts. This would provide greater conceptual and semantic clarity and potentially contribute to a more constructive and less ambiguous academic discourse on activation.

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Notes

1. We conducted searches on Scopus and IBBS, selecting texts which explicitly referred to the term 'activation' in the title, abstract or key words. The ten journals which featured 'activation' research most prominently were: *Social Policy and Administration*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *Journal of Social Policy*, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *European Journal of Social Security*, *Social Policy and Society*, *Critical*

Social Policy, International Social Security Review and *European Journal of Social Work*. Before 1998, there was hardly any academic engagement with activation in these or other relevant journals. Thereafter the topic slowly gained prominence, reaching more than ten entries for the first time in 2007, and has maintained a strong presence ever since, with annual peaks of 29 journal articles published in both 2014 and 2020.

2. We are aware that there are other ways of addressing the problems of concept formation. Collier and Mahon (1993), for example, suggest the use of 'radial concepts' and the 'family resemblance' approach for cases which lack a single core (basic) property and yet can be conceptually conceived of as belonging to the same category (see also Collier and Levitsky, 1997; Gerring, 1999).

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