

Implications of
active labour market politics for wellbeing:
The case of young unemployed people
in Denmark

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

All of the caseworkers I have talked to have been sweet, forthcoming and been like ... with many of them, they have actually listened to what my needs are and whether there are any extra things we need to take into account.

The concept of 'the sword of Damocles' is really a very very real thing when you are on benefits. You, or at least I, feel all the time that there is something ... some kind of threat, hanging over your head all the time
(Niels, ID16-INT01).

In this interview excerpt, Niels describes an experience typical for the young people interviewed for this study: he has had only positive experiences of his encounters with caseworkers, who he experiences as good at listening and taking into account his needs. Yet, his general experience of life on benefits is still negative, as he experiences living in constant fear of making a mistake and losing his benefits.

Niels' background story is also representative of many of the young unemployed people I have interviewed for this study. He started experiencing mental health issues already in high school, but nevertheless managed to complete his final exams. He subsequently started studying at university, first changing from one course to another, and then having to drop out before completing his Bachelor's degree because of stress and depression. Despite his mental illness, he still managed to earn an income from working for four to five months, before he was finally forced to quit his job and apply for benefits when his mental illness became so severe that he was not able to work anymore.

Like Niels, most of the young people in my study suffered from mental illness such as anxiety or depression when first applying for benefits. Many postponed applying for benefits because of negative expectations about the Jobcentre. However, most then described being met by caseworkers who were friendly and helpful, and who were able to offer them activities that helped their recovery process.

In this study, I set out to understand the complexities of how vulnerable unemployed people aged between 18 and 30 experience different aspects of Danish active labour market policies, and how it affects their wellbeing over time. I followed a group of 27 people receiving unemployment benefits over a period of about one year. During this period, I carried out repeated in-depth

interviews aimed at understanding how these young people experience the various meetings and activities they participate in.

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) are a topic of heated public debate in Denmark. Most recently, increasing criticism of the work of municipal Jobcentres has led to proposals to abolish the Jobcentres entirely and (yet again) carry out comprehensive reforms of the entire field. A central question that both decision makers and the general public are asking is whether Jobcentres are actually helping people enter education or employment, or whether they are rather hurting people by causing unnecessary stress and anxiety. There is no easy answer to this question, as the evidence so far shows mixed results of ALMPs in Denmark and elsewhere.

A particularly pressing concern related to the design of ALMPs is how to better support young people to enter employment and education. In Denmark, the group of vulnerable young people, defined as those aged 18 to 29 who have been out of education or employment for the last two years, consists of about 50,000 people (Andersen et al., 2019). Among researchers, practitioners, and politicians, there is a growing realisation of the need to re-think policies aiming to improve inclusion of vulnerable young people in education and employment. This is important in order to prevent this large group from living a life outside the labour market, and experiencing more illness, more crime, and shorter lives than others. Young people's problems tend to persist and have an impact for the rest of their lives; something which has very large cost implications, not only for the individual, but also for society (Schultz-Nielsen, 2016).

In this dissertation, I unpack how different aspects of ALMPs – including the overall policy design, the meetings with caseworkers, and activities such as courses and job placements – affect various aspects of wellbeing for the group of young unemployed people. In doing so, I aim to develop a theoretical framework that is able to explain for example what it is that makes Niels appreciate his encounters with caseworkers, yet still evaluate his overall experience of the benefits system negatively.

1.1. Research question

As a critical social science subject, Social Policy is concerned with the extent to which social policies succeed or fail to promote human wellbeing and with their potentially counterproductive effects
(Dean, 2019, p. 11).

As Dean (2019) writes in his introduction to social policy as a field of study, human wellbeing can be seen as the central outcome of interest when it comes to the study of social policies. This is certainly the case when it comes to active

labour market policies, where there is reason to believe that the use of conditionalities and sanctions has negative effects on the wellbeing of benefit recipients (Wright & Patrick, 2019). Despite this, most studies of the effects of ALMPs are still concerned only with employment outcomes, and neglect the ‘softer’ outcomes related to wellbeing (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016).

Yet, focusing on wellbeing is particularly pertinent in periods of low unemployment, where most of the unemployed are people who face challenges other than unemployment, including mental health issues (Breidahl & Clement, 2010). In addition, there has been a tendency in recent decades to broaden the use of conditionalities and sanctions to the more vulnerable unemployed (Andersen et al., 2017; Dall & Danneris, 2019; Griggs & Evans, 2010; van Berkel et al., 2017). There is still limited knowledge about whether the use of conditionalities has unintended negative consequences for these groups. Finally, previous studies have found a correlation between improvements in subjective wellbeing and the probability of re-employment (Andersen, 2008; Strandh, 2001; Krause, 2013), underlining the importance of wellbeing for exploring how ALMPs affect employment outcomes. For all of these reasons, it is critical to gain a more in-depth understanding of how ALMPs affect wellbeing.

The overall research question I aim to answer in this dissertation is therefore: *How do active labour market policies affect unemployed people’s wellbeing?*

Through this research question, the project will contribute to providing a better understanding of whether and how conditionalities in ALMPs do or do not serve to support vulnerable people in becoming ready to enter education or employment.

1.2. Contributions

Behavioural conditionalities have been a central part of what has been called the ‘activation turn’ in many developed welfare states since the mid-1990s (McGann et al., 2019). These policies are often, implicitly or explicitly, based on a model of the welfare subject as being inactive and not motivated to find work, and therefore in need of ‘activation’ through incentives or deterrents (Wright, 2016, p. 237). Most evaluations of the effects of ALMPs build on models of human behaviour based on rational choice assumptions, including for example the ‘job search theory’ of most economics studies (Rosholm & Skipper, 2009; Rosholm & Svarer, 2008).

This model of human behaviour has been challenged by a growing social policy literature, often based on qualitative longitudinal research, documenting the lived experience of welfare recipients (Danneris, 2018; Danneris & Caswell, 2019; McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Patrick, 2014, 2020; Wright, 2016;

Wright & Patrick, 2019). This research has so far been predominantly focused on empirics, offering limited theoretical contributions and often leaving central concepts, in particular the concept of citizen agency, ill-defined and undertheorised. While there is a large social policy literature on for example encounters between citizens and caseworkers, this literature rarely link the understanding of citizens' experiences of processes directly with their wellbeing. In addition, the use of a wide variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts makes it difficult to relate the individual studies to each other, and to make progress towards a common understanding of how active labour market policies affect the wellbeing of citizens.

This study's main contribution to the literature is the development of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how ALMPs affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. The framework offers several novel advantages:

- a. It provides a platform for bringing together various strains of literature on the experiences of benefit recipients to draw conclusions about the implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing.
- b. As a broad framework, it can help us make sense of how different concepts such as agency, self-efficacy, and stigma are related, based on a unifying set of basic assumptions about human behaviour.
- c. It enables identification of the aspects of active labour market policies that either support or thwart basic psychological needs – and by extension wellbeing – thereby providing a more complete picture than the purely critical approaches found in for example the welfare conditionality literature.

In addition to this theoretical contribution, the case study provides an empirical contribution to our understanding of how young unemployed people with mental health issues experience active labour market policies. As mentioned above, this is a population group that is receiving much political attention, yet there is limited literature specifically on ALMPs for vulnerable young people. Chapter 2 describes these contributions in more detail, and situates my research in the context of the existing literature.

1.3. Conceptualising wellbeing

In order to understand how people's experiences are related to wellbeing, Chapter 3 begins by unpacking the concept of wellbeing. I draw here on Self-Determination Theory (SDT)'s basic psychological needs theory, which proposes three psychological needs as prerequisites for wellbeing: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The need for autonomy refers to being able to approve of our actions as aligned with our preferences and values. The need for competence is the need to experience that one's actions have the desired results. Finally, the need for relatedness is the need to feel that we are important or significant to others, and that we belong to a social group or to society more widely.

These three basic psychological needs form the theoretical basis for how I connect people's experiences of active labour market policies to their wellbeing. I furthermore propose three distinct aspects of active labour market policies – the policy level, implementation processes, and specific interventions – which are each likely to have different implications for the three basic psychological needs, and hence for the wellbeing of benefit recipients.

In Chapter 3, I describe a preliminary theoretical framework with propositions about how different aspects of ALMPs may affect different aspects of wellbeing. This framework provides a starting point for the empirical analyses presented in Chapters 6-8, and is then revisited in Chapter 9.

1.4. Understanding experiences over time

As my focus is on understanding people's individual experiences, I take a qualitative, interpretive, approach to the study. The qualitative methodology provides insights into people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. Contrary to quantitative effect studies, the qualitative approach allows me to provide detailed processual knowledge about what works, when, and for whom (Bredgaard, 2015).

In order to get as close as possible to people's experiences of the different elements of active labour market policies – i.e. meetings, job placements, and courses – I adopt a longitudinal research design, involving repeated in-depth interviews with study participants over a period of about a year. Adding the longitudinal aspect means that I am able to access interviewee reflections on their experiences shortly after the events in which I am interested, meaning that people's memories of and feelings about the experience are still fresh. Furthermore, the longitudinal approach is able to shed light on the dynamic processes of entering and exiting unemployment, and on how different interventions may be more or less successful depending on their timing and their interaction with people's changing experiences over the course of their unemployment period.

In total, I carried out 75 interviews with 27 young unemployed people receiving Education Benefits in a Danish municipality. The data was transcribed into approximately 1,200 pages, which serves as the foundation of the analyses presented in Chapters 6-8. I provide a more detailed description of methodology and methods in Chapter 4.

In order for the reader to understand the mechanisms and processes identified in the analyses, as well as to determine the extent to which the findings are transferable to other contexts, I provide a description of the context of my case study in Chapter 5. This includes a brief overview of Danish active labour market policies, how they are implemented in the case municipality, as well as the characteristics of the study participants.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 present the analysis of the young people's experiences of the three different aspects of active labour market policies: policy, implementation processes, and interventions respectively.

Chapter 6 discusses the young people's general experiences of life in the benefits system. As described in the quote by Niels above, a key takeaway is that study participants generally hold negative views of what is often referred to as 'the system', despite their positive experiences of encounters with case workers and the specific activities they participate in.

I show how the overall experience of life in the benefits system can be described as a particular 'conditionality mindset', comprising five distinct aspects, which are linked to specific characteristics of the active labour market system, and which have negative implications for wellbeing. These are the experiences of restricted agency, feeling monitored, fearing making mistakes, financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future.

Chapter 7 explores the young people's experiences of implementation processes, primarily their encounters with frontline workers. I describe different types of experiences of caseworkers as either caring, indifferent, or controlling, and discuss the consequences of these experiences for the young people's wellbeing. A key finding from this chapter is the importance of social norms and expectations for understanding the young people's experiences of active labour market policies, and how norms of deservingness and reciprocity may have negative implications for their wellbeing.

Chapter 8 examines the young people's experiences of two types of interventions: job placements, and courses providing psychosocial support. A central finding emerging from the analysis of the young people's trajectories over time is the importance of timing interventions to match the needs of each individual at specific points in time. The same intervention may have positive or negative implications for wellbeing for the same person at different points in time.

Finally, for the group of young people suffering from mental illness when entering the benefits system, psychosocial support plays an essential part in supporting them to recover and become ready to enter education and employment.

To conclude and summarise the dissertation, Chapter 9 revisits the theoretical framework, discuss the key findings, highlight the theoretical and empirical contributions of the dissertation, and finally outline concrete policy implications.

Chapter 2:

Review of the literature on experiences and effects of active labour market policies

2.1. Introduction

Several literatures are relevant in relation to this dissertation's overall research question of how active labour market policies affect unemployed people's wellbeing.

First, within the field of economics and political science, there is a large literature examining the effects of active labour market policies (ALMPs) (Bredgaard, 2015; Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016; Card et al., 2010, 2018). This literature mainly contains studies of ALMPs' effects on employment outcomes, with only a few studies considering outcomes related to unemployed people's wellbeing (Danneris, 2016).

Relatedly, there is a large literature on the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing (Clark et al., 2001; Clark & Oswald, 1994; Jahoda, 1982; Jahoda et al., 1971; Lucas et al., 2004; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Nordenmark & Strandh, 1999; Winkelmann & Winkelmann, 1998). This literature is the starting point for a number of studies examining the effects of ALMPs as a substitute for ordinary employment when it comes to wellbeing (Coutts et al., 2014; Creed et al., 1999, 2001; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Oddy et al., 1984; Strandh, 2001; Vuori et al., 2002; Vuori & Vesalainen, 1999).

Second, from a different angle, the more recent literature on 'welfare conditionalities' offers a more critical look at how benefit recipients experience the conditionalities that are attached to current active labour market policies in most countries (Caswell & Larsen, 2020; Davis, 2019; Del Roy Fletcher, 2011; Del Roy Fletcher et al., 2016; Del Roy Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Dunn, 2010; Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Patrick, 2021; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Geiger, 2017; Kaufman, 2020; Knotz, 2018; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Third, there is a large social policy literature examining active labour market policies, including citizen experiences. This literature is characterised by predominantly qualitative case studies, and by a focus on processes rather than outcomes. These studies in particular provide insights into the dynamics of encounters between citizens and caseworkers (Caswell & Caswell, 2020;

Dall & Danneris, 2019; Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Danneris & Herup Nielsen, 2018; Eskelinen et al., 2010; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019).

Finally, there are a limited number of relevant studies within the emerging literature on administrative burden, which also examines outcomes related to wellbeing (Halling & Bækgaard, 2022; Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2022; D. Moynihan et al., 2015).

In this chapter, I review the existing literature on the effects of active labour market policies on unemployed people's wellbeing, as well as the literature considering people's lived experiences of these policies. I limit the scope of the literature review to studies that consider effects and experiences related to wellbeing in a broad sense. As such, I include studies looking at physical and mental health, measures of subjective wellbeing, and related concepts such as agency, self-efficacy, and stigmatisation (I discuss the theoretical connections between these concepts and wellbeing in Chapter 3).

I exclude the many studies examining the effects of active labour market policies on employment outcomes, which while illuminating, are not tightly connected to the question of how policies directly affect unemployed people's wellbeing. I also do not review the large literature on the effects of income transfers on wellbeing, since what I am interested in is not the effect of income support as such, but of active labour market policies and the associated conditionalities and services (Samuels & Stavropoulou, 2016).

A few other related literatures are also excluded from the review, since they have a different central focus than this dissertation. Within political science, the literature on 'policy feedback' provides information about how social policies such as ALMPs affect people's participation in society. This literature is interested in outcomes of civic and political engagement, and has examined how different characteristics of social policies affect these outcomes among benefit recipients (Bruch et al., 2010; A. L. Campbell, 2012; Larsen & Erik Gahner Larsen, 2019; Mettler & Soss, 2004). While potentially relevant, the outcomes of interest are only tangentially related to wellbeing. In the interest of limiting the scope of the review, I have therefore chosen not to include this literature here.

The literature on street-level bureaucracy is closely related to the social policy literature on benefit recipients' experiences of encounters with frontline workers. This literature offers important knowledge about the factors shaping frontline workers' behaviour (Del Roy Fletcher, 2011; Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2006). However, the focus of most of this literature is on how frontline workers make decisions and exercise power and discretion, and not on how these behaviours are experienced by citizens (Dubois, 2010; van Berkel, 2017). Most

of this literature therefore falls outside the scope of citizen experiences, and as such I have not included it in the review.

In summary, in this literature review I discuss studies examining the implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing, including those dealing with the related concepts of ‘activation’, ‘welfare-to-work’, and ‘welfare conditionalities’. Below, I start out with a brief overview of these different concepts, seeking to further clarify the field of study. Following on from this, I review the main relevant literatures in turn:

- a. The literature viewing active labour market policies as a substitute for ordinary employment, based on Latent Deprivation Theory.
- b. The literature on welfare conditionalities.
- c. The social policy literature on lived experiences and encounters between citizens and frontline workers.

These literatures are mainly distinguished by their theoretical approaches, and a main focus of the review is to identify the theoretical concepts and frameworks used in the literature so far to understand the linkages between active labour market policies and wellbeing. I discuss the advantages and shortcomings of the various theoretical approaches, including for example the extent to which they take into account both positive and negative effects and experiences, and whether they encompass all relevant aspects of ALMPs.

2.2. What are we studying? A note on terminology and concepts related to active labour market policies

A trend in the literature on welfare benefits in high-income countries over the last 20-30 years has been the discussion of tying welfare benefits to various other services and activities. At the core of this development is an increased focus on integrating people into the labour market. This overarching phenomenon can perhaps best be described as the spread of policies which comprise a combination of enforcing the obligation of unemployed persons to be available to the labour market, and providing various additional services to support people to enter employment (Bonoli, 2010; Danneris, 2016). The literature employs a range of different concepts to describe this development, including ‘active labour market policies’, ‘activation’, ‘welfare-to-work’, ‘workfare’ and ‘welfare conditionality’. While these terms emphasise different aspects, they all refer to the same phenomenon (or in some cases sub-sets of the same phenomenon).

The concept of ALMPs emphasises the ‘active’ nature of activities aimed at getting people into employment, as opposed to ‘passive’ benefits, where there are no additional activities or services provided or required (Bredgaard, 2015). As such, the concept includes policies aimed at creating incentives for people

to look more intensively for work (such as mandatory job search), skills development, and education services. In an oft-cited account, Bonoli (2010) proposes a typology of four different types of ALMP, encompassing: a) incentive reinforcement; b) employment assistance; c) occupation policies; and d) human capital investment. As such, ‘active labour market policies’ is a broad umbrella term, and it is the broadest of the concepts presented here.

‘Activation’ is another commonly used term in the literature (Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004; Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Clasen & Mascaro, 2022; Lindsay & Mailand, 2004; Malmberg-Heimonen & Vuori, 2005; Raffass, 2017; Sage, 2013). Similar to the concept of ALMPs, it emphasises the ‘active’ aspect, as opposed to ‘passive’ benefits not attached to behavioural demands or services. However, beyond this, there is little agreement on a definition in the literature, and authors differentiate between activation and ALMPs in different ways, or simply do not differentiate between the two (Clasen & Mascaro, 2022).

Based on a review of the literature on activation, Clasen & Mascaro (2022) suggest a conceptualisation whereby “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” (Clasen & Mascaro, 2022, p. 489). As such, activation can be seen as a sub-set of ALMPs (as also suggested by Bonoli, 2013), with an emphasis on the part of active labour market policies that involves increased demands on the unemployed.

Following this conceptualisation, activation becomes closely related to the concept of ‘welfare conditionalities’, which has recently become prominent, in particular in the literature on reforms in the UK (Caswell & Larsen, 2020; Davis, 2019; Del Roy Fletcher, 2011; Del Roy Fletcher et al., 2016; Del Roy Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Dunn, 2010; Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Patrick, 2021; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Geiger, 2017; Kaufman, 2020; Knotz, 2018; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). This concept explicitly emphasises the ‘conditionalities’, and more specifically the *behavioural* conditionalities, attached to benefits (Clasen & Clegg, 2007; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Welfare conditionalities therefore refer to an explicit link between eligibility for benefits and mandatory engagement in activities such as meetings, job searches, and trainings, with failure to do so resulting in benefit sanctions (Dwyer, 2018).

To use the typology suggested by Bonoli (2010), the concept of welfare conditionalities refers mainly to the ‘incentive reinforcement’ part of active labour market policies. As such, the concept emphasises the fact that participation is *mandatory* – with the actual content of activities receiving less attention (Afzal et al., 2013; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). The possibility of being

sanctioned for non-compliance therefore also plays a central role. The literature on welfare conditionalities has in particular described reforms in the UK, which have moved from policies aimed at supporting the unemployed towards more regulatory policies with an emphasis on behavioural conditionalities (Dwyer, 2004; Watts et al., 2014).

‘Workfare’ is another related concept often used in the literature (Brodkin & Larsen, 2013; Clegg & Palier, 2014; Crost, 2016; L. S. Hansen & Nielsen, 2021; Kampen & Tonkens, 2019; Knabe et al., 2017; Knotz, 2018; Mead, 1989). Similar to the distinction between activation and ALMPs, different authors distinguish between activation and workfare in different ways (Clasen & Mascaro, 2022). Brodkin & Larsen (2013) provide a review of the historical development of ‘workfare’, explaining that while the concept originally referred specifically to the requirement for US benefit recipients to work for their benefits, it is now being used to describe the same broader phenomenon as the terms ‘welfare reform’, ‘welfare-to-work’, ‘work-first’, ‘ALMP’, ‘activation’, and ‘insertion’ (Brodkin & Larsen, 2013 p. 37).

To sum up this discussion, there is no consensus in the existing literature on how to define these different concepts or how to differentiate them from each other. However, they can all be said to refer to the same basic phenomenon of requiring benefit recipients to participate in certain activities in order to continue receiving benefits. A possible distinction, which is both useful and reflects at least some authors’ usage of the terms (Clasen & Mascaro, 2022; Giuliano Bonoli, 2013), is between ALMPs as a broader term, and activation or welfare conditionality as concepts emphasising the mandatory participation in activities (regardless of the nature of these activities).

Because of the conceptual ambiguity, and the fact that all of the mentioned concepts refer to (aspects of) the same phenomenon, I have not excluded any of these concepts from review, but consider all studies related to either ALMP, activation, welfare conditionality, workfare or welfare-to-work.

2.3. Active labour market policies, employment, unemployment, and deprivation

As mentioned in the introduction, a distinct literature on the wellbeing effects of active labour market policies takes its departure from Latent Deprivation Theory and the large literature examining the effects of unemployment on wellbeing (Clark et al., 2001; Clark & Oswald, 1994; Lucas et al., 2004; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Nordenmark & Strandh, 1999; Winkelmann & Winkelmann, 1998). The basic theoretical argument of this literature is that active labour market policies can provide some of the benefits of ordinary employment, and thereby improve the wellbeing of participants (albeit not to the same level of wellbeing as those in employment).

The unemployment literature has examined the effects of unemployment on outcomes of both subjective wellbeing and mental health, among others (Jahoda et al., 1971; Lakey et al., 2001). Mechanisms identified include relative poverty, social isolation, loss of self-esteem, negative health behaviour, and the negative effect of unemployment spells on subsequent employment patterns (Bartley, 1994). The most influential theoretical account of this connection between unemployment and mental health or wellbeing is Jahoda's 'Latent Deprivation Theory', which argues that employment not only fulfils one's material need for income, but also various psychological ('latent') needs, including time structure, social activity, and status, and that this explains the negative health effects of unemployment (Jahoda, 1982). There is empirical evidence showing the validity and robustness of the deprivation model (Zechmann & Paul, 2019).

In another influential account, Fryer (1986) criticises Jahoda's theory for overlooking the negative impact of unemployment on agency and autonomy. Fryer's 'agency restriction model' proposes that the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing occur because of the way unemployment places restrictions on the unemployed person's sense of agency and autonomy (Fryer, 1986).

Based on these longstanding theoretical and empirical findings of the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing, a literature has developed around the theoretical expectations that active labour market policies can function as a substitute for ordinary employment, and therefore provide some of the same mental health and wellbeing benefits (Sage, 2018; Strandh, 2001). Theoretically, this literature expects the wellbeing of people participating in ALMPs to fall somewhere in between the situation of those in open unemployment (who are expected to experience worse wellbeing) and those in full employment (who are expected to experience better wellbeing). The suggested mechanisms being in particular the enhancement of time structure, social contacts, participation in collective processes, ameliorating loss of status and identity, and regular activity (Strandh, 2001). In addition, and following Fryer's (1986) argument for the importance of agency and autonomy, Strandh (2001) argues that ALMPs can provide new marketable skills, improving the job market opportunities of the unemployed and thereby create an increased sense of control over one's own life.

A number of quantitative studies, carried out mainly between the mid-1980s and early 2000s, showed support for these theoretical expectations (Coutts et al., 2014). They found positive effects of participation in activation on a number of different wellbeing-related outcomes, including:

- Improved general psychological health and reduced distress (Creed et al., 1999, 2001; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Oddy et al., 1984; Strandh, 2001; Vuori et al., 2002; Vuori & Vesalainen, 1999).
- Reduced depression (Creed et al., 1998; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Oddy et al., 1984; Vinokur et al., 2000; Vuori et al., 2002).
- Reduced anxiety and improved social adjustment (Oddy et al., 1984).
- Reduced sense of helplessness (Creed et al., 1998, 2001; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Oddy et al., 1984; Vinokur et al., 2000).
- Improved self-efficacy and mastery (Creed et al., 1998, 2001; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Vinokur et al., 2000).
- Improved life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (S. H. Andersen, 2008; Bonin & Rinne, 2014; Creed et al., 1998; Crost, 2016; Knabe et al., 2017; Korpi, 1997; Oddy et al., 1984; Wulfgramm, 2011).
- Improved emotional functioning (Vinokur et al., 2000).

More recent quantitative studies have found similarly positive results. Koopman et al. (2017) reviewed 24 studies of 21 different interventions aimed at improving the mental health of unemployed people and found promising evidence that interventions combining occupational skills and resilience training are effective in promoting mental health. Puig-Barrachina et al. (2019) reviewed 36 studies and found overall positive effects of participation in ALMPs upon health. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021), based on panel data from the UK covering 1991-2019, found that participation in ALMPs improved the mental health of participants.

Similarly, Björklund et al. (2017), in a qualitative study of fifteen young Finnish men aged 18-27 who were participating in activation at a Resource Centre, found that although the centre did not mimic ordinary employment as such, it still provided many of the positive wellbeing effects of employment. This included increasing optimism and belief in the future, self-confidence, feelings of meaning, and motivation to start work or education. The author linked these positive experiences with the way the intervention provided daily routines and structure, a sense of belonging with other participants and staff (a personal guidance councillor), and the freedom to choose topics or projects to engage in.

Qualitative studies in the Danish context, examining the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, showed that some benefit recipients appreciated the pause on ALMP activities, while others did not (Nielsen et al., 2020). A survey of 557 citizens who had chosen to continue their activities during lockdown, despite not being required to do so, found that these people felt that they gained life skills (including structure and daily activity), social contact, and

support with health issues from the activities, and that many wanted to maintain contact with course employees (Væksthuset, 2020). Also in the Danish context, Hansen & Nielsen (2021), through an ethnographic account of a workfare site, found that people were able to create meaning out of apparently meaningless tasks, for example by emphasising the social value of interacting with other participants.

However, some newer studies have found negative effects of welfare-to-work programmes, for example when people are forced to engage in workfare activities which take time away from job search activities or caring for family members (Brady et al., 2015; M. Campbell et al., 2016; Hohmeyer, 2012). In light of these recent findings of more negative effects of ALMPs on wellbeing, there have been a few efforts to further develop Jahoda's theoretical framework to better account for these negative experiences.

Carter & Whitworth (2017) found indications that the 'Work Programme', implemented in the UK between 2011 and 2017, may have had negative wellbeing effects on participants, as compared to unemployed people not participating in activation. They attribute this to the fact that the programme was too 'thin', as there was a strong incentive for private course providers to push people out into work as quickly as possible, regardless of the quality of the job. The authors build on findings from Strandh (2001) and Wulfgramm (2011) that the positive wellbeing effects of activation requires that work experience is 'self-directed, meaningful and relevant'. They conclude that "work experience is an important area of development in UK WtW activity, but needs to be rooted in claimants' agency, such that participants play a key role in identifying relevant and desired sectors and roles" (Carter & Whitworth, 2017, p. 812). Other studies have also found support for the importance of citizens feeling supported by caseworkers and experiencing programme participation as voluntary and meaningful (Gundert & Hohendanner, 2015).

Sage (2013, 2015, 2018; Sage et al., 2015) also takes his departure from empirical work on the UK Work Programme, and develops the original Latent Deprivation Theory along similar lines. He starts from Jahoda's theories and adds the competing perspectives of Fryer (1986) and Ezzy (1993) to form a broader theory about unemployment as entailing loss of not only the functions of work identified by Jahoda, but also loss of agency and social status. Sage's main contribution is to qualify the Latent Deprivation Theory by viewing the negative wellbeing effects of unemployment as socially constructed and tied to people's relationships with welfare state institutions.

He argues that social policies should go beyond simply replicating the environment of paid work to more actively seeking to support people's sense of agency, dignity, and social status. He criticises studies relying on Jahoda's the-

oretical framework, including Carter & Whitworth (2017), for failing to account for people's feelings of lost autonomy and agency as well as the subjective meanings that people attach to the status of being unemployed.

Contrary to Jahoda's original theory, Sage's theoretical contribution recognises that social policies "can both ameliorate and intensify" the negative experience of unemployment (Sage, 2018, p. 1048). He points out that, in the effort to replicate a work environment, the UK Work Programme missed the importance of subjective meaning and value, and the importance of offering activities that match participants' skills and abilities (Sage, 2018). In addition, the programme failed to compensate for agency loss because advisors did not have the time or resources to provide people with long-term focused support, and often ignored the complex barriers to employment that people experienced.

Sage (2018) contrasts these experiences with people's experience of another programme in the UK, the 'Personal Support Programme' (PSP), which provided much more personalised support and better opportunities for forming positive relations with staff. This programme better supported people's needs by providing relevant and personalised support, even if not directly related to labour market participation. He found that "over time, gaining control over these problems increased the participants' sense of power over their own lives" (Sage, 2018 p. 1054).

To sum up, this strain of literature has focused on the wellbeing effects of participating in specific activities as part of ALMPs. It has found predominantly positive effects, although also showing that these are contingent on the provision of choice and good relations with frontline workers. While the theoretical approach has evolved recently, a shortcoming of this literature is that it still takes as a point of departure the assumption that employment is in and of itself important for wellbeing. This leads to the assumption that the more active labour market policies resemble ordinary employment, the better it should be for wellbeing.

However, this assumption ignores that even if people in employment are on average better off than those in unemployment, employment also often has detrimental effects on wellbeing, as evidenced for example by the large amount of people experiencing work-related stress (Dewe et al., 2012; Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Similarly, not all people who are *not* in ordinary employment suffer from low levels of wellbeing – for example, people who choose to stay at home to take care of their children, retirees, or those with sufficient wealth to not have to work (Boland & Griffin, 2015a). A possible way forward would be to start instead from a recognition of the importance of meeting basic human needs, rather than from the assumption that the specific solution for meeting these needs is employment.

2.4. The impacts of welfare conditionalities

The literature on welfare conditionalities represent another strain of literature, which is interested in the wellbeing of people taking part in ALMPs. This literature takes a different perspective than the studies using Latent Deprivation Theory. Instead of starting from the assumption that employment is valuable for wellbeing, these studies focus on the conditionality aspect of active labour market policies, and have for example examined the mental health outcomes of stricter sanctions. The starting point of these studies is therefore an expected negative effect of conditionalities on the wellbeing of benefit recipients. Much of this literature focuses on understanding both the effects and experiences of reforms in the UK. It includes both quantitative and qualitative studies, and studies interested in both causal identification as well as more interpretive accounts focusing on understanding the lived experiences of benefit recipients.

The move from the deprivation-inspired studies to the literature on welfare conditionalities is to some extent chronological. Although studies in the tradition of Latent Deprivation Theory are still being carried out, the policy turn from human capital approaches to workfare or work-first approaches across many OECD countries has been accompanied by a more critical literature. This literature is less interested in the effects of specific interventions and more interested in the wellbeing implications of the increased demands placed on benefit recipients within what has been termed “welfare conditionality regimes” (Caswell & Larsen, 2020).

The bulk of the literature on welfare conditionalities consists of qualitative accounts, which, through a large numbers of interviews with benefit recipients, primarily in the UK, have documented how people experience welfare conditionalities as ‘demonizing’ or ‘criminalizing’ (Del Roy Fletcher, 2011; Del Roy Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2020). In this way, the stigmatisation involved in the current UK welfare conditionality regime is a common theme throughout much of this literature (Dwyer, 2000).

Several studies also highlight the demoralising and demotivating effects of using sanctions to motivate job searching and participation in meetings and activities (Dean 2003; Wright et al., 2020). Similarly, Wright & Patrick (2019) highlight loss of agency as central to the negative experience of welfare conditionalities, undermining people’s capacity to seek employment. Patrick (2017) also found that conditionalities diminished people’s autonomy and agency by ‘conditioning’ them to manage their own behaviour in specific ways in order to meet the demands placed upon them.

Qualitative studies have shown how eligibility assessments, job search requirements, and threats of sanctions in the UK system lead to increased experiences of anxiety, fear, mental distress, and social isolation for vulnerable groups, such as people with mental health issues and people with disabilities (Dwyer, 2018; Dwyer et al., 2020; Sharon Wright et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2020; Wright & Patrick, 2019).

Some studies also highlight the adverse effects of conditionalities on the relationship between frontline workers and citizens, describing an impersonal approach, which some interviewees experience as intimidating, dehumanising, and disempowering, perceiving them as threatening rather than supporting (Wright & Patrick, 2019; Wright et al. 2016). Other studies have identified negative effects on social integration (Girardi et al., 2019; Green et al., 2017), and in the Danish context, increased transitions into sickness benefits as a result of increased conditionalities for vulnerable young people (Maibom et al., 2014).

Sanctions play a central role in the welfare conditionality literature. Many studies have examined the effects of both enforced and threatened sanctions. Wright & Patrick (2019), based on two qualitative longitudinal studies in the UK, found that among people participating in ALMPs there is a widespread fear of being sanctioned, even if most had in fact never received a sanction. The study emphasises how the threat of sanctions negatively impacts the encounter between frontline workers and citizens by making interactions focused on authorities' control over, rather than support for, the unemployed individual.

A recent review of the international quantitative evidence on the impacts of sanctions found that sanctions are generally associated with increased material hardship and health problems, including some evidence that sanctions were associated with increased child maltreatment and poorer child wellbeing (Pattaro et al., 2022). Other studies have found that sanctions led to increased stress and reduced emotional wellbeing (Dorsett, 2008; Goodwin, 2008; Peters and Joyce, 2006; Griggs & Evans, 2010). Qualitative research in the UK found that the risk of sanctions also led to experiences of anxiety in relation to attending appointments (Dwyer & Bright, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2016; Johnsen, 2016; Wright & Stewart, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). In extreme cases, sanctions in the UK have been linked to self-harm and suicide attempts (Batty et al., 2015; Wright & Stewart, 2016).

These qualitative studies have also been supported by two quantitative studies from the UK, providing evidence that sanctions lead to increases in both self-reported anxiety and depression (Williams, 2021b) and prescriptions for antidepressants (Williams, 2021a). Similarly, Dore et al. (2022)

found that temporarily waiving work requirements in the US ‘Temporary Assistance for Needy Families’ (TANF) programme was associated with reductions in the number of mentally unhealthy days reported by benefit recipients.

A number of studies within the emerging public administration literature on ‘administrative burden’ have also examined the effects of state actions on various outcomes related to wellbeing, conceptualised as ‘psychological costs’ (Halling & Bækgaard, 2022). Bækgaard et al. (2021) specifically used the easing of conditionalities for unemployed people in Denmark imposed by COVID-19 to show how this led to higher levels of experienced autonomy and reduced stress. They did not however find any effect on people’s experience of stigma. Other studies from Denmark have similarly shown that sanctions led to declines in job searching and worsened wellbeing and health for vulnerable benefit recipients (Caswell et al., 2015). While sanctions did lead to exit from benefits, most people did not in fact find employment, but rather exited into open unemployment without benefits, and were back on benefits shortly after (Caswell & Andersen, 2011).

It can be difficult to disentangle the wellbeing effects of conditionalities as such from the effects of active labour market policies more generally. One study which has explicitly examined the effects of enforced participation in activities is Malmberg-Heimonen & Vuori (2005). Based on an experiment with 627 unemployed persons in Finland, the study found that enforced participation impaired the otherwise positive mental health effects of a job search training programme, and actually decreased re-employment for the most vulnerable group of long-term unemployed people.

Wright & Patrick (2019) provide one of the few attempts within this literature to move beyond single case studies. Based on two qualitative longitudinal studies, they identify some ‘shared typical’ experiences of welfare conditionalities, including: ‘orientations towards employment’, ‘prevailing poverty’, ‘how conditionality governs the encounter with frontline workers’, and the ‘elusiveness of the right support’. However, they do not explicitly link these experiences to wellbeing.

In general, the literature on the negative effects of welfare conditionalities on wellbeing contains limited theorisation about the mechanisms linking conditionalities with different aspects of wellbeing. Looking across the literature, there are however some common theoretical approaches and concepts, employed either explicitly or implicitly.

First, some studies have referenced theories and concepts from behavioural economics, in particular concepts of scarcity, reciprocity and trust (Delsen, 2019; Groot & Verlaet, 2017; Muffels, 2021; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Second, several studies draw on theories from social psychology that highlight the importance of autonomy and intrinsic motivation, inspired in particular

by Self-Determination Theory (Delsen, 2019; Groot & Verlaet, 2017; Muffels, 2021; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Related to this is a common focus on the importance of agency, although the concept is often not well-defined or theorised (Wright, 2012, 2016). Third, a few authors have suggested using Sen's Capability Approach as a starting point for a theoretical framework linking social policies and wellbeing (Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Egdell & Graham, 2017; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Orton, 2011).

Together, these theoretical frameworks provide reasons to expect that trying to control people's behaviour through external incentives such as threats of sanctions will undermine people's sense of autonomy and their intrinsic motivation. The result is that these types of policies in fact lower people's wellbeing as well as their ability to enter and maintain employment (Raffass, 2017; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). As such, both the theoretical assumptions and empirical findings of the welfare conditionality literature are unequivocally negative with regards to the impact of active labour market policies on wellbeing. This would seem to contradict the findings of the literature reviewed above based on Latent Deprivation Theory, which found overwhelmingly positive effects of ALMP participation on wellbeing. However, this is not necessarily the case.

First, despite their similarities, the studies in the different literatures in practice study different things: the Latent Deprivation Theory studies focus on participation in activities, including the human capital support programmes, e.g. skills development trainings, that are also part of active labour market policies, whereas the welfare conditionality literature considers people's experiences of the demands and sanctions they are facing. Second, there is to a certain extent a difference in the studies' temporal and geographical foci as well, with the welfare conditionality literature examining mainly policies in the UK following reforms that increased conditionalities, while many of the Latent Deprivation Theory studies took place prior to this and draw on data from other countries.

Finally, as described above, studies in the Latent Deprivation Theory tradition also found that aspects of implementation such as the involvement of benefit recipients in decision-making processes and relations with caseworkers are important for the positive effects of ALMPs to materialise. One way to synthesise the two strains of literature would therefore be to conclude that participation in ALMP interventions often have positive effects on wellbeing, but that this is contingent on implementation processes that respect benefit recipients' agency and enable development of positive relations between frontline workers and citizens. Examined in isolation, conditionalities and

sanctions have negative effects on wellbeing, and may indeed impair the positive wellbeing effects of participation in activities (Malmberg-Heimonen & Vuori, 2005).

To conclude, the welfare conditionality literature provides valuable insights into benefit recipients' experiences of conditionalities, including mandatory participation in activities under the threat of sanctions. It points to some common experiences which underline the importance of the concepts of agency and stigma. However, these concepts are generally still under-theorised in the literature and there is as yet no common theoretical framework for understanding people's experiences of welfare conditionalities across case studies.

The literatures reviewed so far have examined the wellbeing effects of participation in activities and of living under a welfare conditionality policy regime. In the next section, I turn to the large social policy literature that has examined the importance of implementation processes, in particular the specific encounters between frontline workers and citizens.

2.5. Encounters with frontline workers and the lived experiences of benefit recipients

The third and final major literature of relevance to my research question generally focuses on understanding processes and experiences. It consists mainly of qualitative and interpretive case studies, in particular studies of encounters between citizens and frontline workers, and draws on a great variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts, often from sociology. The literature is primarily concerned with understanding how people interpret their own situation rather than with specific outcomes (Dean, 2003; McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Patrick, 2014, 2017a; Stewart et al., 2020; Wright, 2016).

Compared to the literatures described above, this literature unpacks citizen experiences in more detail, and often provides a more nuanced description of the encounter between citizens and frontline workers. The processes being analysed are generally not explicitly linked to wellbeing outcomes, yet provide valuable information about, for example, citizen agency. Given that the studies reviewed so far highlight the importance of citizen participation for wellbeing outcomes, studies illuminating when and how participation is made possible at the micro-level provide valuable knowledge about this mechanism.

A particular focus of this literature is on the encounter between citizens and frontline workers, with a large number of studies emphasising the importance of these encounters for both wellbeing and employment outcomes (Ravn & Bredgaard, 2021; Carcillo & Grubb, 2006). There are differing views in the literature about the relationship between citizen experiences of their specific encounters with caseworkers, and their more general experience of

‘the system’. Some authors argue that benefit recipients generally understand experiences of frontline workers as representative of their broader relationship with the state (Soss, 2005, p. 309; Zacka, 2017). However, other studies have found that people do not generally see frontline workers as representing the state, a phenomenon described by Hansen (2021) as ‘bureaucratic decoupling’ and by Nielsen et al. (2022) as a ‘system/actor-based hybrid’ Jobcentre.

While the literature discusses the asymmetric power relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients, similar to the welfare conditionality literature, there are also many studies providing more nuanced views, showing how frontline workers and citizens negotiate roles and identities (Senghaas et al., 2019; Solberg, 2011a; Solberg, 2011b). In doing so, these studies employ a wide variety of concepts and theoretical approaches.

Some studies have focused on how active labour market policies affect participants’ sense of self-efficacy. This includes the importance of experiences of successes in creating self-confidence, which can be achieved through work experiences (Bredgaard, 2012). Again, the relationship between citizens and frontline workers is highlighted as an important factor for whether self-efficacy is supported or undermined in decision-making processes (Danneris & Dall, 2017; Marston & McDonald, 2008). Danneris & Dall (2017) identify three different ways that frontline workers respond to client expressions of self-efficacy: a) supporting statements; b) transferring responses, where attempts are made to transfer client expressions of self-efficacy to concrete actions that can increase employability; and c) challenging, either talking up or down, client perceptions of self-efficacy. They highlight self-efficacy as something that “is talked into being in the meeting, making the social work professional’s abilities to recognize and respond adequately in the situation crucial” (Danneris & Dall, 2017, p. 131). An important point relating to factor c) above is that it is not always appropriate for frontline workers to support citizen self-efficacy – it may be necessary sometimes to make citizen perceptions of their own abilities more realistic, so as not to set them up for failure.

Another group of studies have examined benefit recipients’ experiences of stigma (Frost & Hoggett, 2008; H. Hansen et al., 2014; Manchester & Mumford, 2012; Rogers-Dillon, 1995; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Watson, 2015). Contrary to common assumptions of the importance of policy design for people’s experience of stigma, several studies have again highlighted that the experience of stigma is complex and dynamic (Rogers-Dillon, 1995), and that it depends on the ways in which programmes are implemented, including interactions with caseworkers (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006).

2.5.1. Agency is a central concept but remains under-theorised

A third concept which has received a lot of attention in this literature is agency. The question of citizen agency within ALMPs occupies a particularly central role, and I will therefore devote substantial attention to this topic in the following pages.

There are a substantial amount of social policy studies dealing with the question of how encounters between citizens and frontline workers affect citizen experiences of agency (M. L. Andersen, 2020; Bredgaard, 2012; Carcillo & Grubb, 2006; Caswell & Caswell, 2020; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003; Kampen & Tonkens, 2019). This literature does not always explicitly make the connection between such encounters and citizen wellbeing, but it is nonetheless clearly relevant for this discussion. The context of active labour market policies is described by most of this literature as detrimental to citizen experiences of agency, although there are also studies painting a more nuanced picture of how agency can be negotiated in specific encounters, arguing that supporting agency is possible to some extent even within a welfare conditionality regime.

For example, Kampen & Tonkens (2019), through a longitudinal qualitative study with 66 workfare participants in the Netherlands, shows how experiences of disempowerment and empowerment are dependent on caseworker approaches, the timing of job offers, and participants' self-understanding. Mik-Meyer & Silverman (2019) explore the co-constructed nature of agency in three Danish homeless shelters. Using an interactionist approach inspired by Goffman, the study shows how agency is negotiated between citizens and frontline workers, and how citizens are given, or take on, the roles of either active citizen or passive client. The study shows how citizens are not necessarily always passive, rather they can choose to collaborate with or challenge the views of frontline workers. More generally, the authors argue that many principles or policies, such as for example 'client centredness', have no inherent meaning – instead, meaning is created by the involved actors in the specific situation. As I discuss further below, this focus on the importance of the specific situation is common to many of the micro-sociological, interactionist studies within this literature.

The concept of 'agency', while widely used in the literature, is seldom well-defined or theorised (Wright, 2012). There are, however, some studies that have engaged in a more conceptual discussion of the meaning of agency in relation to active labour market policies. For example, an influential account is Le Grand (2003, 2006) who defines agency as an individual's capacity to take action, and discusses the significance of whether policy-makers consider benefit recipients to be active, autonomous, agents or passive individuals.

Others have noted that agency is not just the capacity to act, but also entails a certain level of reflexivity – knowing both what your objectives are and how to achieve them (Dean, 2003).

Important conceptual work has been carried out by Wright (2012, 2016), who describes citizen agency in relation to ALMPs as context-specific and negotiated, rather than something which is inherent to specific individuals. In keeping with the UK welfare conditionality literature, Wright is highly pessimistic about the possibilities of agency within a welfare conditionality regime, emphasising instead how conditionalities lead to ‘collapse of agency’ (Wright, 2016, p. 240), and that benefit recipients’ experiences are predominantly ones of relative powerlessness. Nevertheless, Wright (2016) does advocate for a model of human behaviour which sees people as active agents capable of making decisions and taking action. Another contribution to this literature is Eschweiler & Pultz (2021), who provide an extensive theoretical discussion of different forms of agency. The authors draw on critical theory and critical psychological concepts of ‘restricted’ and ‘expansive’ agency to better understand when and how benefit recipients either challenge conditions or accommodate and reproduce them.

2.5.2. The importance of choice and user involvement

Several studies emphasise that citizens’ levels of choice and involvement is important for successful interventions (Danneris & Caswell, 2019; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010; Kampen & Tonkens, 2019). A good example is Eskelinen & Olesen (2010), who, in a qualitative longitudinal study of 19 unemployed people, examine Danish benefit recipients’ experiences of active labour market policies, including their experiences of agency and powerlessness. The authors use a narrative approach based on symbolic interactionism and actor-network theory to highlight how interventions are constructed in cooperation between clients and frontline workers, with benefit recipients as active actors. The study shows how benefit recipient’s agency, understood as the space for participation and action, is central for understanding the effects of ALMPs. Involvement of citizens is essential, not only because it qualifies the intervention but also because it protects against negative consequences (Baadsgaard et al. 2014).

Real user involvement requires both that citizens have agency and that frontline workers are willing to engage with this agency (Djuve & Kavli, 2015). Several studies show how benefit recipients do have agency, even if it is constrained by conditionalities and asymmetric power relations. Caswell et al. (2013) highlight how, even though faced with asymmetric power relations, citizens are not powerless. Benefit recipients do not automatically accept the

identities offered by caseworkers, but rather participate actively in interactions, and resist and protest against the unwanted identities offered by front-line workers.

Several studies based on qualitative longitudinal research emphasise that there are also temporal aspects to this. These studies point to the need for ‘diachronic’ approaches, which reflect the changing experiences of target groups over time, and the need for the adaption of policies and caseworker approaches that respond to their clients’ changing needs and self-understanding (Dall & Danneris, 2019; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010; Kampen & Tonkens, 2019). Danneris (2018) shows how agency varies over time, with individuals experiencing stages that are characterised by a lack of agency, where one’s situation is perceived to be determined by external factors, as well as stages in which they have a higher sense of agency, experiencing coherency and determination, which allows people to set goals and act to achieve them. Different stages have different consequences for wellbeing, including for one’s sense of meaning, goal orientation and self-efficacy. Danneris & Caswell (2019) build on these findings, looking at ‘what works’ from a qualitative, life history perspective, and also identifying people’s sense of agency as an important aspect of what works for people in finding employment.

Several studies have focused specifically on identifying different strategies adopted by citizens in response to welfare conditionalities (Danneris & Dall, 2017; Del Roy Fletcher et al., 2016; Djuve & Kavli, 2015; H. C. Hansen & Natland, 2017; Solberg, 2011a, 2011b; Toerien et al., 2015). An early account is Dean (2003), who identified two primary strategies of participants in active labour market policies in the UK: a self-development strategy, aligned with discourses of self-improvement and progress; and a self-assertion strategy, set against authority. Hansen & Nielsen (2021), through an ethnographic account of workfare in Denmark, similarly showed the different strategies that people employ in order to create meaning out of apparently meaningless work tasks, for example by emphasising the social value of the activity and re-framing it to fit a narrative of personal development. Lister (2004) provided a seminal account of citizens ‘getting by’ or ‘getting out’, or creating resistance by ‘getting back at’ or ‘getting organised’. Building on this work, Wright et al. (2020) identified four different types of citizen responses to conditionalities in the UK: acquiescence, adaptation, resistance, and disengagement. Similarly, Mik-Meyer & Silverman (2019) identified three different client positions, based on fieldwork in Denmark: the resolute client, the acquiescent client, and the passive client. Eskelinen & Olesen (2010) found that some benefit recipients were actively resisting or cooperating, with some displaying a high degree of independent initiative and decisions, while others were passive and without influence. Importantly, they note that these should not be confused with types of

individuals, but rather that they represent different types of interactions between citizens and frontline workers, and that different individuals can adopt different strategies at different times (Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010).

The literature focused on micro-level examinations of interactions generally shows that there is nothing deterministic about whether the system supports or undermines agency: different individuals describe very different levels of support from different frontline workers (Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010). Micro-sociological studies of specific situations have illustrated how frontline workers can support citizen experiences of agency in practice by assisting citizens to take the initiative to form and express their views (Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Eskelinen et al., 2010). Several studies have focused on the importance of communication between citizens and frontline workers for how citizens experience active labour market policies. Caswell & Dall (2020) show how conversations do focus on the needs of citizens, but that caseworkers also have to keep the labour market in focus. However, they often do so in a general and vague way, in order not to put undue pressure on people who face many barriers to employment. In this way, caseworkers have to strike a difficult balance between the needs of citizens and the requirements of the system.

2.5.3. Barriers to user involvement and support of agency in a welfare conditionality regime

Although the above studies highlight that citizens do have agency, and that negotiations take place between citizens and frontline workers, the literature does recognise the many challenges for real user involvement within a system of welfare conditionalities characterised by power asymmetry between citizens and frontline workers, where a focus on citizen empowerment risks glossing over real conflicts of interests between citizens and frontline workers (Monrad, 2020). Andersen (2020) shows that finding empowering ways of communication is difficult within organisations characterised by new public management ways of working, which diminish traditional social work emphasis on dialogue and interaction, and instead promote a focus on authority, timeliness, and process.

Several studies have highlighted how frontline workers' sensitivity to people's individual needs is made more difficult because a) benefit recipients neglect their own needs and instead do their best to meet requirements and demands, and b) caseworkers are faced with 'system' demands that compete with the needs of citizens (Caswell & Dall, 2020). Involvement of citizens in the 'co-production' of ALMPs requires a relationship based on mutual trust between citizens and frontline workers, which is not easily established in an asymmet-

ric power relation. It is further complicated by the fact that citizen participation is not voluntary, that the objectives are pre-defined as employment, and that citizens have no formal decision-making power (Caswell & Larsen, 2020).

As mentioned above, several studies have noted that the requirement to conform to expectations can restrict people's agency in participating in ALMPs – what Patrick (2017b) calls 'conditioning' and what in the Capability Approach is called 'adaptive preference formation' (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016). For example, Järvinen & Mik-Meyer (2003) found that citizens undergo a process of 'clientization'. Through the experience of being subjected to a powerful system, benefit recipients learn to do their best to meet requirements and demands, rather than articulate their own preferences.

Similarly, Cooney (2006) highlights state domination of benefit recipients through internal self-deception where individuals participate in their own oppression. The author finds that benefit recipients do have agency, but that their room for action is limited since they need to continue to receive benefits, and therefore do not dare to make demands on the system. In line with this argument, the governmentality perspective emphasises that even if active labour market policies are experienced by participants as empowering, they are in fact a way for the state to exercise control over citizens, and acceptance is simply indicative that citizens have been effectively manipulated (Kampen & Tonkens, 2019; Marston et al., 2005). This perspective therefore in practice leaves very little room for individual agency.

2.5.4. Analytical approaches

The literature reviewed above employs a wide variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts, often from the sociological literature. While the literature contains many different approaches, two overall approaches, or analytical traditions, stand out.

First, a micro-sociological approach, often inspired by interactionist approaches, offering in-depth analysis of social dynamics of particular situations (Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019). The interactionist approach in general is based on the premise that human beings act based on the meanings they attach to phenomena, and that this meaning is socially constructed through interactions. It sees people as reflective by nature, as capable of choosing how to interpret specific social definitions of reality, and as capable of either accepting or rejecting these definitions (Järvinen, 2020). This part of the social policy literature often highlights the agency of both frontline workers and citizens, and how meanings and identities are negotiated in specific interactions between them.

The other main strand of literature takes a macro-perspective, often inspired by a governmentality approach (Boland & Griffin, 2015b, 2016; Caswell et al., 2015; Dall & Danneris, 2019; Høgsbro, 2012; Pultz, 2018; Stenson, 2005). This literature sees the behaviour of individuals as much more constrained by social structures, leaving limited room for agency. A central premise is that power in modern society is exercised partly by influencing or guiding people by shaping their actions and self-perceptions (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013).

The two approaches each have their strengths and weaknesses, and both highlight aspects of social reality important for understanding how ALMPs affect behaviour. The macro-focused literature is useful for examining how power is exercised through policy design, and what the implications of this are for frontline worker and citizen behaviour. However, a shortcoming is that it does not explain all of the variation that happens because of the specific ways that individuals interact with each other within broader structures. As the micro-sociological studies show, the micro-processes of frontline worker citizen encounters are “much more complex than e.g. governmentality studies suggest. Citizens and caseworkers are not ‘predetermined sock-puppets’, but active agents engaged in negotiations about what is going on in the specific situation” (Baadsgaard et al. 2014, p. 159).

The strength of the micro-sociological approach is that it tells us more about how people relate to social structures, how and why they choose to either accept or reject them, and how social norms and identities are enacted in the specific encounter between frontline workers and citizens. One shortcoming of this literature, on the other hand, is that it does not provide information about the role of aspects of social reality outside the specific interaction, even though it is clear that people’s behaviour at the micro-level is embedded in a wider social reality (Dall & Danneris, 2019).

2.6. Conclusions

This review has identified three different strains of literature that offer distinct perspectives, even if there are also overlaps between them:

- a. The literature based on Latent Deprivation Theory mainly considers the effects of participation in activities as part of active labour market policies. The basic assumption is that these activities will have a positive effect on wellbeing to the extent that they provide some of the same benefits as ordinary employment.
- b. The welfare conditionality literature focuses on the wellbeing implications of increased demands on benefit recipients, particularly on the potential negative effects of conditionalities as a result of stigmatisation and diminished agency and autonomy.

- c. The social policy literature on citizen experiences of encounters between frontline workers and benefit recipients discusses in particular the possibilities and limitations of citizen agency.

The three strains of literature can be said to focus on different aspects of active labour market policies. The welfare conditionality literature focuses mainly on how changes at the policy level, particularly reforms which increase the use of conditionalities and sanctions, affect citizen experiences.

The social policy literature on encounters between citizens and frontline workers examines implementation processes at the frontline – the specific interactions between citizens and frontline workers.

Meanwhile, the Latent Deprivation Theory literature focuses mainly on effects of the various interventions, activities or services which are part of active labour market policies. We can therefore see three different ‘levels’ or ‘aspects’ of active labour market policies here: a) the policy, or system/regime, level; b) the implementation process level; and c) the intervention level.

Despite their differences, there are also common themes emerging across the three literatures. First, the importance of user involvement, choice and agency, and second, the importance of relations between citizens and frontline workers. The literature generally indicates negative effects of compliance demands on wellbeing (through experiences of stigma and loss of autonomy and agency). However, the content of activities can have positive effects on wellbeing if activities are meaningful to people’s objectives, for example by providing structure, daily activity, and social relations. A common finding is that it is important that people have influence on the activities they participate in, hence emphasising the significance of autonomy.

Overall, the conclusion from the review is that a focus on wellbeing in a broad sense is meaningful and important. However, the literature examining the effects of active labour market policies on aspects of wellbeing is still limited. The social policy literature reviewed often provides quite descriptive accounts, with limited theoretical contributions and often not explicit linkages between processes and experiences of wellbeing.

This literature is very useful for understanding processes in particular cases, but the very inductive approach, with often rather ad-hoc use of a great variety of theoretical frameworks and concepts, makes it difficult to relate the individual studies to each other and make progress towards a common understanding of how active labour market policies affects the wellbeing of citizens. Similarly, the welfare conditionality literature is generally under-theorised, drawing on a disparate set of concepts from behavioural economics and social psychology, without a comprehensive framework.

Sage (2018) presents probably the most developed theoretical framework yet for analysing the wellbeing effects of ALMPs. However, this framework still suffers from a counterproductive starting point in the literature on the psychosocial value of employment. There is a need for a more coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework, which can improve our understanding of the mechanisms linking different aspects of active labour market policies to wellbeing. Such a framework should be able to differentiate between the different levels of experiences of active labour market policies – the levels of policy (system), processes, and interventions. It should also be able to capture the ways that active labour market policies may either support or undermine benefit recipients' experiences of wellbeing. In the next chapter, I present a proposed framework that fulfils these requirements.

Chapter 3:

Theoretical framework:

Understanding implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing

As described in Chapter 1, the primary focus of this dissertation is to contribute to a better understanding of how active labour market policies affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature and found that, while we know a great deal about the effects and experiences of active labour market policies, the mechanisms linking active labour market policies to wellbeing are generally under-theorised.

In this chapter, I clarify the meaning of the key concept of wellbeing and present a preliminary theoretical framework for understanding the implications of ALMPs for the wellbeing of benefit recipients. I argue that a framework based on Self-Determination Theory provides a useful way to structure and make sense of the main findings described in Chapter 2. Further, it provides valuable conceptual grounding by defining a limited number of basic psychological needs as a foundation for linking people's experiences of active labour market policies with wellbeing outcomes. This theoretical approach has several advantages:

- a. It provides a platform for bringing together various strains of literature on the experiences of benefit recipients to draw conclusions about the implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing.
- b. As a broad framework, it can help us make sense of how different concepts such as agency, self-efficacy, and stigma are related, based on a unifying set of basic assumptions about human behaviour.
- c. It enables identification of the aspects of active labour market policies which either support or thwart basic psychological needs – and by extension wellbeing – thereby providing a more complete picture than the purely critical approaches.

In this chapter, I first synthesise the findings of the literature presented in Chapter 2, identifying the main mechanisms linking ALMPs and wellbeing. I then relate these mechanisms to the Self-Determination Theory framework of basic psychological needs, theorising how different aspects of ALMPs are likely to support or undermine these needs, and hence wellbeing. This section includes a discussion of how the SDT framework connects with the most important concepts and theoretical approaches used in the existing literature.

I propose a multi-level framework, which can capture the often diverging wellbeing implications of different aspects of ALMPs, including aspects related to policy design, to implementation processes, and to specific interventions such as courses and job placements. The result is a preliminary theoretical framework, which forms the basis for the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, while keeping an open mind to findings which may not fit the framework. Chapter 9 then revisits the theoretical expectations in light of the empirical findings, and presents a revised version of the framework along with a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses and how it may be improved through future research.

3.1. Theoretical mechanisms linking active labour market policies and wellbeing

As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is possible to identify common theoretical mechanisms across the different literatures dealing with ALMPs and wellbeing. These mechanisms include the provision of time structure and regular activity, skills development, social contacts, social status and identity, effects on agency, relations with frontline workers, meaning, and self-efficacy. In this section, I briefly recap the literature on each of these mechanisms.

3.1.1. Time structure, regular activity, and social contacts

Latent Deprivation Theory suggests that the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing is partly related to the loss of structure and regular activity provided by employment (Jahoda, 1982). The implication is that activities offered as part of ALMPs may support wellbeing by offering structure and regular activity. As described in Chapter 2, this is to some extent supported by empirical evidence, with studies attributing positive wellbeing effects of activities to the provision of daily routines and structure (Björklund et al., 2017).

However, the literature also shows that it matters whether activities are chosen by participants themselves, and whether they are perceived to be meaningful. Activities may have negative effects on wellbeing, if people are forced to participate in activities which they do not perceive to be meaningful, and which take time away from, for example, job search activities or caring for family members (Brady et al., 2015; M. Campbell et al., 2016; Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Hohmeyer & Katrin Hohmeyer, 2012). These findings point to ‘meaning’ as a central concept worthy of further exploration.

Latent Deprivation Theory also proposes that the loss of wellbeing associated with unemployment is related to the loss of the social contacts often found in the workplace. Through participation in activities and opportunities

for participating in collective processes, activities offered as part of ALMPs may compensate for this loss.

3.1.2. Social status and identity

Identity Theory and the idea of Status Passage points to the way the experience of unemployment is socially constructed. The transition from employment to unemployment carries with it a loss of identity and social status, because of the central role employment plays in the development of these elements of self (Ezzy, 1993). As such, the transition from employment to unemployment has important implications for how people view themselves, which may partly explain the negative effects on wellbeing. What this means for ALMPs is that we should pay attention to the ways in which these policies affect unemployed people's identity-formation processes, including their perceptions of their own social status (Sage, 2018). Depending on the way they are designed, ALMPs may either ameliorate or exacerbate some of the negative social effects of unemployment (Boland & Griffin, 2016; Sage, 2018).

These ideas are closely related to discussions of stigma and stigmatisation in the welfare conditionality and wider social policy literatures (Del Roy Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Frost & Hoggett, 2008; Hansen et al., 2014; Manchester & Mumford, 2012.; Rogers-Dillon, 1995; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Watson, 2015; Wright et al., 2020). Stigma can be defined as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 1986 p. 3). In most societies, both being unemployed and receiving unemployment benefits is stigmatised. However, the extent of stigma associated with ALMPs may vary depending on policy design and implementation (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006).

3.1.3. Agency

Much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 emphasises the importance of agency. However, the concept is often not well-defined in the literature, nor explicitly linked to wellbeing. It is often used interchangeably with concepts such as autonomy and empowerment. Agency is commonly defined in the sociological literature as the capacity of an individual to affect desired changes to their environment. This capacity can then be effectuated to various degrees in practice through actual actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

The concept of agency plays a central role in the theoretical work of Sage (2018), which identifies loss of agency as one of the three types of loss associated with the experience of unemployment. He draws on the influential work of Fryer (1986), who presented the ‘agency restriction’ model to explain the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing. The agency restriction model

argues that the negative effects of unemployment on wellbeing can be explained partly by the loss of personal agency and autonomy, i.e. the loss of control over one's life that comes from the limits on the capacity for action imposed by unemployment.

Sage's (2018) contribution is to connect this theory with social policy to emphasise the importance of ALMPs in supporting people's sense of agency. This can for example be by providing relevant skills development activities, which expand people's labour market opportunities. Agency may also be supported by involving benefit recipients in identifying relevant activities (Björklund et al., 2017; Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010). Perhaps even more importantly, the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes protects against the negative consequences of people being forced to participate in activities which are not meaningful to them (Baadsgaard et al. 2014).

On the other hand, agency may be thwarted in welfare conditionality regimes, which limit people's influence in decision-making processes, and instead force benefit recipients to participate in activities under threat of sanctions (Wright et al., 2020; Wright & Patrick, 2019). Conditionalities and sanctions may also undermine agency in more subtle ways, for instance by 'conditioning' people to limit their actions to what is perceived to be acceptable, even in the absence of explicit demands (Patrick, 2017b). As a form of external incentive, conditionalities and sanctions may also undermine people's intrinsic motivation to, for example, search for work (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

3.1.4. Relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients

Another common theme present in all of the three literatures reviewed in Chapter 2 is the importance of relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients for both wellbeing and employment outcomes (Ravn & Bredgaard, 2021; Carcillo & Grubb, 2006). As mentioned, the quality of the relations between citizens and frontline workers has important implications for citizens' experiences of agency, and for whether relevant support is provided (Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Sage, 2018). The relationship is also important for whether the self-efficacy of benefit recipients is supported or thwarted (Danneris & Dall, 2017; Marston & McDonald, 2008), and for whether programmes are experienced as stigmatising or not (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006).

Welfare conditionalities may have a negative effect on relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients by focusing interactions on control, rather than on the provision of relevant support, by making benefit recipients neglect their own needs in order to meet the requirements, and by making case

workers focus on the needs of ‘the system’ rather than the needs of citizens (Caswell & Caswell, 2020; Wright & Patrick, 2019). Studies show that much depends on the specific meetings between frontline workers and citizens, and that frontline workers can support citizen experiences of agency in practice by assisting them in taking the initiative to form and express their views (Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Eskelinen et al., 2010).

3.1.5. Conclusions

Based on the existing literature, this brief overview has laid out the theoretical mechanisms linking ALMPs to wellbeing under four broad headings: a. time structure, regular activity, and social contacts; b. social status and identity; c. agency; and d. relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients. However, what is still missing is a common framework to provide structure to these different concepts and mechanisms. In the next section, I present Self-Determination Theory as a broad framework capable of bringing together these core concepts and theoretically linking them to wellbeing.

3.2. Theorising wellbeing and basic psychological needs

The plethora of different concepts and theoretical approaches identified in Chapter 2 give rise to two questions for how to progress from here: first, how to structure these different insights into a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework, and second, how to theoretically link these mechanisms to wellbeing. As mentioned above, Self-Determination Theory has supplied concepts and theoretical building blocks to develop our understanding of benefit recipients’ experiences of ALMPs, in particular the implications of welfare conditionalities for feelings of autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In the following, I present the theory in more depth and discuss how it relates to the key concepts presented in the previous section.

3.2.1. Conceptualising and understanding wellbeing

The academic literature broadly recognises two different ways of conceptualising wellbeing: the hedonic and the eudaimonic view (Dean, 2019). Both have long histories in Western thought, dating back to ancient Greek philosophers. Simply put, the hedonic conceptualisation views wellbeing as happiness, while the eudaimonic conceptualisation views wellbeing as the actualisation of human potentials (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The hedonic view is a narrow conceptualisation, often operationalised with a simple measure of subjective wellbeing that asks people to rate their overall life satisfaction, sometimes combined with a measure of the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions.

The eudaimonic view of happiness is much broader. According to this view, the hedonic view of happiness is too narrow and shortsighted. A central argument is that not everything which causes short-term positive emotions actually leads to longer-term wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 146). The eudaimonic conceptualisation instead sees wellbeing as associated with personal development and living life in accordance with one's values. Another way of conceptualising this view of wellbeing is as *positive functioning* (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 241).

Departing from these basic conceptualisations of wellbeing, the question is how to further unpack the concept and identify linkages between experiences of ALMPs and different aspects of wellbeing. In the process of exploring potential approaches, I considered two theoretical frameworks which both present comprehensive and coherent theories for understanding wellbeing.

First, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, some authors have suggested using the Capability Approach (CA) as a framework for analysing the effects of ALMPs on wellbeing (Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Ohls, 2017; Egdell & Graham, 2017; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016). The Capability Approach was first presented by Amartya Sen (1985, 2001) and further developed by Martha Nussbaum (2011) among others. It has since gained popularity particularly in the field of international development, and has formed the basis for the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) and the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (Alkire & Santos, 2014). The CA presents a normative foundation for evaluating policies based on the central values of freedom, wellbeing, and agency, taking into account external factors and personal characteristics (Sen, 2009). It is based on a basic view of human nature which “sees individuals as autonomous persons who should be able to decide what they wish to achieve based on their own understanding of a ‘good life’” (Egdell & Graham, 2017, p. 1192). The concept of ‘capacity’ speaks well to the notion of agency, which is shown in the literature to be central to people's experiences of conditionalities.

However, the CA also has a number of shortcomings. First, it is not very clear how this framework should be operationalised (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016). As Orton (2011, p. 358) notes, “Sen did not provide any form of checklist as to what the approach might mean in practice”. The theory has been criticised for not providing any guidance as to what an appropriate set of capabilities may be, or how these should be measured or ranked. As illustrated by the HDI and Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, this may result in a very extensive list of different indicators of importance to human wellbeing, including income, health, and education. Second, the CA has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the self-sufficient individual actor, while overlooking the importance of social aspects of human life and the relational nature of human wellbeing (Dean, 2009; Taylor, 2011). This means for example that the

theory is of little use for understanding the role of social norms and expectations for people's experiences of ALMPs – including for example the central experience of stigmatisation.

Self-Determination Theory is another broad theoretical framework which has increased in prominence since its development in the 1980s. As mentioned above, concepts from SDT, notably the importance of autonomy and intrinsic motivation, have been used by some authors to suggest mechanisms explaining the negative effects of welfare conditionalities on wellbeing (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Contrary to the Capability Approach, Self-Determination Theory research has put much emphasis on identifying a limited number of basic psychological needs, which form the normative basis of the framework, and on providing both theoretical and empirical evidence to demonstrate the importance of these needs. The three needs are well described and operationalised, and the framework has been used to evaluate the wellbeing effects of social contexts in a range of different fields. Central to the SDT's basic needs theory are the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs provide a broad umbrella, encompassing the concepts of autonomy, agency, and the importance of social norms and expectations for wellbeing. The framework furthermore includes an elaborate theory of the interaction between internalisations of social norms, autonomy, motivation, and wellbeing. SDT thus presents a normative foundation and a framework that is at once concise and comprehensive enough to capture the main aspects of people's experiences of ALMPs described in the literature, and to theorise the connections between these experiences and wellbeing.

In the following, I present SDT's ideas about basic psychological needs and internalisation in more detail. I then turn to adapting the framework to the evaluation of active labour market policies, drawing on the insights from the existing literature, and discussing how the SDT framework can be complemented by other theories and concepts.

3.2.2. Basic psychological needs as predictors of wellbeing

The conceptualisation of wellbeing in Self-Determination Theory follows the eudaimonic tradition, and as such views wellbeing as much broader than simply subjective happiness (Ryan et al., 2008). In keeping with the eudaimonic view, Ryan and Deci define wellbeing as 'being fully functioning' (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 241). They equate this with 'thriving', understood as living with 'vitality, awareness, access to, and exercise of one's human capacities and true self-regulation.' This is quite a broad understanding of wellbeing, which is therefore not operationalised with a single measure, but by looking at many

different factors, including, but not necessarily limited to: symptoms of anxiety or depression, expressions of energy and vitality, sense of coherence and meaning, defensiveness, somatic symptoms, as well as hedonic happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 241).

The eudaimonic conceptualisation of wellbeing is by no means unique to SDT. Where SDT is distinct from some other theories of wellbeing is in its view that there are basic psychological needs, which are not seen as constitutive of wellbeing, but rather as predicting both hedonic and eudaimonic indicators of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 146). SDT specifies three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness. SDT's 'Basic Psychological Needs Theory', one of six 'mini-theories' within the broader theoretical framework, describes the theoretical connections between the three basic psychological needs and both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, connections which have also been documented empirically (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 243; Ng et al., 2012).

Autonomy

In SDT, being autonomous means being able to approve of one's actions as being aligned with one's own preferences and values. It is the opposite of feeling pressured to act in a certain way. It is important to note that acting in accordance with rules or norms is not contrary to being autonomous, as long as an individual accepts the rules and norms for themselves (Chirkov et al., 2003 in Ravn 2021 p. 57).

According to Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 97), autonomy is both a phenomenological and a functional issue. Phenomenologically, it refers to the sense that actions are 'congruent expressions of the self', i.e. that they are fully self-endorsed, rather than being directed by forces external to the self. The concept of autonomy in SDT is therefore related to what phenomenologists describe as the experience of 'self-approval' (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1561-1562). What matters is not what caused a certain action in the moment, but rather whether it can be approved by the self upon subsequent careful reflection. However, SDT argues that this also has functional implications, as actions that are not fully autonomous will also not fully engage the person's cognitive, affective, and physical capacities (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 97).

Autonomy is also related to the idea of choice. Having relevant and meaningful alternatives to choose from facilitates autonomy by providing the experience of 'choicefulness' (Ryan & Deci, 2006 p. 1577). However, more choices do not necessarily mean more autonomy: it is possible to have just one choice but still feel autonomous if that choice is aligned with one's own preferences. On the other hand, having too many choices can feel overwhelming and may actually impede the sense of choicefulness (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1577).

SDT posits that, on average, rewards, threats of punishment, evaluations, surveillance, deadlines, and imposed goals tend to be experienced as controlling, and thus undermine autonomy. Theoretically, this means that the more conditionalities in ALMPs direct people's behaviour, and the more they are at odds with the individual's intrinsic preferences, the greater the sense of loss of autonomy, and consequently the loss of wellbeing (Moynihan et al., 2015). However, the manner in which these activities are implemented and communicated can have an important effect on the extent to which they are experienced as controlling (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 150). These theoretical propositions are well aligned with the existing literature on effects and experiences of ALMPs, as described in Chapter 2. SDT researchers have identified a number of ways to support people's sense of autonomy:

- *Provision of choice*: this means for example allowing people to choose which activity to do, or when and how to do it. Providing tasks that are interesting and with a clear rationale provides a sense of ownership and autonomy, and thereby supports intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 150; Ryan & Deci, 2020). As mentioned above, having choices does not automatically lead to a sense of autonomy. However, in general, SDT research has shown that providing people with choices tends to support the feeling of autonomy and hence intrinsic motivation (Zuckerman et al., 1978; Patall et al., 2008, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2020). An interesting further qualification on this topic is that the ongoing freedom to carry out activities in the manner of one's choosing is more valuable for supporting the sense of autonomy than simply providing a choice between different activities (Mouratidis et al., 2011; Reeve et al., 2003). Of course, the options provided still have to be meaningful to people (Assor et al., 2002; Moller et al., 2006). Too many options to choose from can also make the decision-making process burdensome (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).
- *Perceived motivation of authorities*: studies have also found that the perceived motives of authorities matter for people's experience of activities. Hence, if authorities are perceived to be acting in order to control people's behaviour, this is likely to lead to less intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan 2017, p. 164; Wild, Enzle, & Hawkins, 1992; Wild, Enzle, Nix, & Deci, 1997). This underscores that there is not a simple relationship between the effects of actions such as feedback, deadlines, provision of choice, and surveillance. Whether such actions support or undermine basic psychological needs and intrinsic motivation depends on the context in which they take place, and the meaning – or what Deci and Ryan call the 'functional significance' – that individuals attach to it (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 165).

- *Communication*: language and tone are important for people's experience of verbal communication (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 445). For example, the way feedback is communicated is important for how it affects intrinsic motivation. Positive feedback can be communicated in a controlling or in an informational way, and if it is the former, it can actually undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 163). Studies, particularly in the context of parenting, have shown that it is possible to set limits on behaviour without undermining children's experience of autonomy, when a) controlling language is minimised, b) children's feelings are acknowledged, and c) a meaningful rationale is provided. Statements of contingent approval can have controlling impacts. In order to not undermine autonomy, authority figures should avoid guilt-inducing phrases and social comparisons, and instead use informational, nonjudgmental statements focused on the rationale for goals rather than 'oughts' or 'musts'.

Competence

The need for competence is a psychological need to experience that one's actions have the desired results. It is not about receiving praise from the surroundings, but about the sense of satisfaction that comes from completing a task in the desired way. The focus on competence as important for wellbeing is not unique to SDT. It is the focus of much of modern psychology, and has been researched extensively in relation to concepts such as efficacy, self-efficacy, optimism, achievement motivation, success expectancies, and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). What Ryan and Deci highlight as unique to the SDT view of competence is the linkage between competence and autonomy: experiencing oneself as competent requires experiencing one's actions as having been organised and initiated by oneself. In other words, people have to feel ownership of the activities they succeed in (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Performing well on a task over which one does not feel ownership does not improve the sense of competence. Furthermore, Ryan and Deci note that many of the other approaches do not recognise the intrinsic value of feelings of competence – i.e. that successfully performing an activity has value in itself, not just because of the value of the outcome of the activity.

SDT research has identified a number of ways that social context can be supportive of people's sense of competence:

- *Providing challenging, yet manageable, tasks*: a central aspect of a social context which supports competence, is that people should be able to successfully complete most of the tasks they are given (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 153). On the other hand, tasks should also be challenging, since

succeeding at something easy will normally not result in intrinsic satisfaction, but rather in the extrinsic pleasure that comes from impressing others (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 152-153). Finding the right balance in activities is therefore important for whether they will support or undermine competence. Activities can a) support competence if they provide tasks that are challenging, but which can be successfully completed, b) ignore competence if they provide tasks that are too easy, or c) undermine competence, if they provide tasks that are too hard. Finally, as mentioned above, it matters whether the activities are accepted by people themselves, or are imposed on them by others. The theoretical prediction of SDT is actually quite specific here, then: in order to support a sense of competence, a social context must offer tasks which people will succeed at most of the times, although intermittently providing tasks which are difficult, at ‘the leading edge of one’s capabilities’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 153).

- *Providing structure (scaffolding)*: a sense of competence can be supported by providing structure to people’s choices, e.g. through recommendations or plans that help people make meaningful choices (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 326-327). Goals and deadlines provide structure and can be motivating if they have a clear rationale and are arrived at in non-controlling ways. However, they can also be experienced as controlling if they are imposed by others and backed by threats or contingent rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 149). Whereas controlling contexts put pressure on people to perform, structure entails setting clear expectations and goals and having consistency in rules and guidelines (Ryan & Deci, 2020).
- *Providing informative feedback*: feedback on the performance of an activity can be considered a type of verbal reward. This feedback can take different forms, with different effects on the recipient’s sense of competence. It can for example involve telling people that they did well at an activity, that they are good people for doing the activity, or that they did better than others. SDT posits that in general, verbal rewards in the form of positive feedback is likely to increase people’s sense of competence, and are less likely than tangible rewards to undermine their sense of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 128). However, verbal feedback can also undermine autonomy, and thereby intrinsic motivation, for example if people are being evaluated in a manner which makes them feel controlled, or if feedback is given in a controlling context (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 154). This is for example the case if people are given positive feedback about an activity which they did not choose

for themselves, in which case receiving praise can be perceived as part of an attempt to control behaviour.

- *Identifying barriers and how to overcome them:* SDT argues that identifying barriers as well as formulating strategies to overcome them should be done in accordance with the person's own experience and preferences.

Relatedness

In SDT, the need for relatedness refers to the need to feel that we are important or significant to others, to feel that others respect and respond to our existence. Conversely, this means avoiding feelings of rejection, insignificance, and disconnectedness (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 96). The need for relatedness is both relevant for person-to-person relations and for the more general feeling of belonging to a particular social group.

The need for relatedness is central to SDT's understanding of what motivates the internalisation of values from society. It is the need for relatedness that makes people interested in what others believe, how they act, and what they expect, so that they can better behave in ways which ensure acceptance (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 96).

However, this process of internalisation is not necessarily positive for well-being – that depends on whether these goals and values are successfully integrated, or if they remain separate from the self (ibid). Furthermore, the sense of relatedness does not arise from merely being accepted by one's community because one conforms to the norms. Rather, it arises from the sense that others care about us unconditionally, because of who we are, not conditional on things such as what we own or how we dress (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 97). People are more willing to internalise ideas and inputs from people to whom they feel connected, and connectedness provides a sense of security for moving forward.

SDT has focused mainly on relatedness in the form of developing close relations between typically two people, such as parent-child, teacher-student, etc. and less on how people or institutions can support people's relatedness to others more generally. This is partly a result of SDT originally building on insights from psychologists using their own experience of the therapist-client relationship. However, SDT scholars clearly have ambitions for it to be much more far-reaching, and also to speak to relatedness more broadly.

Supporting relatedness is associated with supporting autonomy, in the sense that the same actions are likely to support both. For example, as mentioned, a central aspect of supporting autonomy is to take the other person's frame of reference, which is also likely to be experienced as caring (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 167; Deci et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2006).

SDT research has identified the following ways to support relatedness:

- *Listen and display unconditional positive regard:* as described above, key to feelings of relatedness is to feel seen and understood by other people. A social context that supports relatedness is thus one in which people make an effort to understand the other person's perspective and express interest in the other persons thoughts, and feelings. Active listening is one technique for achieving this. It involves asking questions and listening openly, with acceptance, interest, and non-judgment (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 443). This will decrease the likelihood that the other becomes defensive and hides feelings and experiences. It is important to recognise emotions as providing information, not as good or bad. Interest in people's emotions without judging or controlling stimulates more openness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 443). Statements which can be perceived as blaming or judgmental should be avoided.
- *Express authenticity, transparency, and involvement:* this means being honest and personally engaged in the relation. In the case of parent-child relation, involvement has been measured through three parameters: a) parents' knowledge of their child's psyche and behavioural patterns, b) the time parents spend with the child, and c) the pleasure parents derive from being with the child, measured as the warmth and affection of their tone (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989, p. 146). An important element for adults is to demonstrate a genuine interest in the person and to use the necessary time to develop the relationship (Teixeira et al., 2019 p. 49). This includes asking open questions, confirming the answer has been received, reflecting on what has been said, enquiring about the person's lifeworld, working collaboratively with the person, dealing with changes/resistance, and offering emotional support (Gillison et al., 2019, p. 119).
- *Mobilising networks and encouraging cooperation and teamwork:* As mentioned, SDT has so far focused more on supporting relatedness in person-to-person relations, and less on how to support feelings of connectedness within/between groups and wider society. However, supporting people to improve their social networks and work together with others – whether in voluntary associations, sports, or workplaces – is also an important way to support people's need for relatedness.

Other needs

The fact that it is these three needs which have come to be defined as more 'basic' than others has to some extent historical reasons: SDT started with a focus on autonomy, and then later added competence and relatedness, based

on work by other psychologists. Only later has there been an explicit discussion among SDT researchers of what actually distinguishes these basic psychological needs from other psychological needs. Vansteenkiste, Ryan, and Soenens (2020) describe the criteria for something to qualify as a basic psychological need: first, it has to be a psychological need (not physiological/biological); second, it has to be important for wellbeing; third, it has to have arisen evolutionary; fourth, it is distinct and not derived from other needs; and fifth, it is universal.

As such, there may well be other important psychological needs that are particularly important for certain groups of people, for certain cultures or in certain social contexts – including for example in relation to ALMPs. However, in order for a need to be defined as *basic*, it has to be universally applicable across ages and cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 86). Furthermore, each of the basic needs may be divided into smaller components, related to the overall concept, and there may therefore also be other needs that are important, but which can be seen as deriving from one of the three basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 87). Based on the existing literature, at least three other needs may be of particular relevance to an analysis of the context of active labour market policies.

- *Meaning*: a potential psychological need which would seem very relevant for an analysis of experiences of ALMPs is the sense of meaning (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 252). A sense of ‘meaning’ can be defined, in a very general sense, as the experience of an activity fitting within a larger whole (Ravn, 2008). As such, it refers to a sense of purposefulness that makes life more comprehensible (Isaksen, 2000; Bruner, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi, 1989). Weinstein et al. (2012) have discussed whether the feeling of meaning should be considered a basic psychological need. The authors recognise the importance of the concept of meaning, but argue that it should not be considered a separate need, for three reasons. First, the feeling of meaning is derived from the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs. Second, not all activities which provide a sense of meaning ensure wellbeing. People may have life goals, such as the attainment of status symbols, which may deepen their sense of meaning but which are extrinsic, and therefore may still ultimately undermine their wellbeing. Third, meaning is an outcome or result of activities, not something inherent in activities themselves. The SDT perspective on meaning is therefore that the sense of meaning arises through the processes of intrinsic motivation and integration – which again depends on whether the social context supports the three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 253). This makes meaning a useful concept in an analysis of whether a social context supports or

undermines basic psychological needs, even if it does not in itself denote a separate need.

- *Beneficence*: another psychological need is the feeling of beneficence, understood as the need to feel that one is doing something of value to others (Martela & Ryan, 2016, p. 754). Empirically, Martela and Ryan (2016) found that beneficence has an independent effect on wellbeing. Beneficence was measured by four questions: a) I feel that my actions have a positive impact on the people around me, b) the things I do contribute to the betterment of society, c) in general my influence in the lives of other people is positive, and d) I have been able to improve the welfare of other people. The importance of this need has also been shown in relation to research on the value of work within the Latent Deprivation Theory tradition, where it is conceptualised as the feeling of ‘collective purpose’ that people often obtain from work (Zechmann & Paul, 2019). In addition, there is a large related literature within public administration on the concept of ‘public service motivation’, which has examined how the idea of serving the public interest motivates public sector workers (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 2000; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015; Perry & Wise, 1990; Ritz et al., 2016; Vandenaabeele, 2007).
- *Awareness*: the SDT perspective on meaning also recognises the potential importance of awareness, as “in order to find true meaning, individuals must get to know who they truly are – that is, know what is valuable and important to them – and act in accord with that knowledge” (Weinstein, Ryan & Deci, 2012). Awareness can be defined as “open, relaxed, and interested attention to oneself and to the ambient social and physical environment” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 267). According to SDT, wellbeing depends on people being able to successfully integrate external demands, i.e. taking ownership of their own actions (as per the definition of autonomy). For the process of integration to take place, people need to be able to reflect on their own needs and preferences, and process the various social norms and demands they face. Awareness of both one’s own self and the surroundings is essential for integration to occur, and therefore also for wellbeing.

3.3. Wellbeing and the internalisation of social norms

It is clear from much of the social policy literature on benefit recipients’ experiences of ALMPs that social norms and expectations play an important role in shaping these experiences. As will become apparent in the analysis presented in Chapter 7, social norms and expectations are also key to understand-

ing how my interviewees experience ALMPs in the Danish context. It is therefore important to include here a reflection on how we should theoretically understand the role of social norms for wellbeing.

SDT has distinct theoretical arguments about when and how individuals internalise social norms. In this section, I reflect upon how these arguments connect with other relevant theories, since an important criteria for assessing the value of a theory for the accumulation of knowledge is the extent to which it is commensurable and consistent with other theories in the field (Gerring, 2012, p. 68). If a theory does not connect with others, but provides a completely unique and separate perspective, it will be less useful for understand the existing knowledge. I therefore discuss how SDT's theory of internalisation connects with the two main sociological perspectives applied in the existing social policy literature, as described in Chapter 2, namely the governmentality perspective and the interactionist perspective.

To the best of my knowledge, and despite all three theories being widely used across many different fields, nobody has so far discussed how Self-Determination Theory relates to the other perspectives. I present here a very brief discussion, aiming to clarify the main similarities and differences between the three approaches, as well as their respective advantages and drawbacks. I first present a short description of SDT's arguments about how individuals internalise social norms, and the related implications for their motivation and wellbeing, before turning to the governmentality and interactionist perspectives for a comparison.

3.3.1. The SDT theory of internalisation

As mentioned above, SDT is a broad theoretical framework which comprise several 'mini-theories' that together covers both basic psychological needs and motivation. SDT's theories about motivation describes when, how and why people internalise social norms, and what the implications of this are for wellbeing.

The concept of motivation is concerned with explaining why people engage in particular actions and not others. Traditional psychological theories of motivation include, in particular, behavioural theories, which see human action as essentially caused by external stimuli. These theories have today been mostly superseded by social cognitive theories, which see motivation as determined by beliefs about the self, cognitions, and social contexts. Influential social-psychological theories of motivation include expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995), social learning theory (including self-efficacy), goal orientation theory, and Self-Determination Theory.

What sets SDT apart from other theories of motivation is its focus on intrinsic motivation. The discovery that some forms of external rewards actually

undermine motivation for carrying out a task was what initially started the development of SDT, and led to the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ravn, 2021). Much research within SDT has focused on documenting factors that support intrinsic motivation, and it is perhaps this work that the theory is still best known for (Ryan & Deci, 2017, Chapters 6-7). The intrinsic aspect of motivation is described by another of SDT's mini theories, the so-called 'Cognitive Evaluation Theory', which provides theoretical predictions about how social contexts affect intrinsic motivation. The theory argues that satisfying the needs of both competence and autonomy is necessary in order to attain intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Relatedness seems to be of secondary importance, although Deci and Ryan (2017, p. 124) also mention that relatedness 'plays a role' in intrinsic motivation, especially for activities which have a social element.

As mentioned, one of the early findings of SDT research was that extrinsic rewards can under certain conditions shift the locus of causality from internal to external, a finding which has also been influential in behavioural economics in the form of 'Motivation Crowding Theory' (Frey, 1997; Frey & Jegen, 2001). This shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation happens when people are engaged in intrinsically motivated activities and a reward is then introduced. People's motivation then shifts from doing the activity for its own sake, to doing it for the reward. Some empirical studies have shown that contingent rewards can undermine people's sense of autonomy (Houliort et al., 2002). However, this is not always the case. For example, a reward which is not expected, not salient, or not contingent on carrying out a specific task, will not result in this shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation.

Perhaps even more interesting is the part of SDT which explains people's motivations for carrying out activities which are *not* intrinsically interesting. After all, we spend most of our day-to-day lives carrying out activities for other reasons than because they are interesting in and of themselves.

"Organismic Integration Theory" is another of the six 'mini-theories' within SDT, and it provides a theory to explain why people carry out activities which are not intrinsically interesting. Put differently, it is a theory about how people internalise and integrate external demands (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 179). It describes a continuum of internalisation, ranging from least autonomous to most autonomous, with internalisation defined as "the process of taking in values, beliefs or behavioural regulations from external sources and transforming them into one's own" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 180). This continuum describes the extent to which individuals have integrated a social requirement into their own code of values (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 182). Four different types of extrinsic motivation are described along this internalisation continuum, from least to most autonomous:

1. *External motivation* describes a lack of internalisation. This is the case for activities that are carried out in order to achieve an external reward or avoid sanctions.
2. *Introjected motivation* describes internalisation without acceptance by the self. This describes a situation where one feels pressured to carry out an activity, even if there is no external pressure being applied. This is often accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 181).
3. *Identified motivation* is when demands and norms and expectations are accepted by the self, even if they are not fully integrated. In this case people will make a decision to accept the external regulation. This is typically seen in relation to the values of education and work (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 188).
4. *Integrated motivation* is the motivation of doing things because of norms that have been successfully internalised. This is the case when external demands have been integrated in ways that fit into one's worldview and is coherent with one's values. Ownership means that regulation is experienced as coming from the self and as authentic, so one does not feel pressured to do things (Ravn, 2021, p. 110).

In addition, “amotivation” is defined as the absence of any intention to act, which is usually the result of unfulfilled needs – either the need for competence or the need for autonomy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 191). Table 1 below shows the four different types of extrinsic motivation, as well as amotivation and intrinsic motivation. As mentioned above, the theory describes a continuum, and the different types of motivation should therefore be seen as ideal-types. Empirically, a given person in a specific situation will experience them as overlapping to some extent.

From the SDT perspective, the integration of social norms is neither positive nor negative, per se. The basic need for relatedness means that humans have a natural tendency to want to integrate the social norms of our surroundings in order to ‘fit in’ and attain a feeling of relatedness with the people who matter to us, as well as with the social groups with which we wish to belong. Whether this has positive or negative implications for wellbeing depends on how the norms align with our preferences and values, and hence the extent to which they are integrated (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Table 1: The Organismic Integration Theory motivation types

Behaviour	Non-self-determined					Self-determined
Motivation	Amotivation	Extrinsic motivation				Intrinsic motivation
Regulatory style	Non-regulation	1. External regulation	2. Introjected regulation	3. Identified regulation	4. Integrated regulation	Intrinsic regulation
Regulatory process	Non-intentional Non-valuing Incompetence Lack of control	Compliance, external rewards and punishments	Self-control, ego-involvement, contingent, self-esteem	Personal importance, conscious valuing	Congruence, awareness, synthesis of identifications	Interest, enjoyment, inherent satisfaction

Note: Adapted from Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 193).

3.3.2. The governmentality perspective on internalisation of social norms

The important role of social norms in guiding behaviour naturally leads to questions of what norms unemployed people perceive as salient, how these norms are created and expressed/communicated, and what consequences these norms have for unemployed people's responses to active labour market policies.

SDT cannot help us answer these questions, because while it is a fruitful theory for understanding the effects of social norms upon wellbeing, it does not fully explain how these norms are shaped through either government policies or interactions with others.

The governmentality approach may complement the SDT perspective by providing a way to understanding how people are governed through organised social practices (Boland & Griffin, 2015b, 2016; Caswell et al., 2015; Dall & Danneris, 2019; Høgsbro, 2012; Pultz, 2018; Stenson, 2005). For example, Pultz (2018) uses the governmentality approach to analyse the norms surrounding unemployed people in Denmark, how these are expressed through policies and practice, and how they are perceived by unemployed people themselves.

The governmentality perspective and Self-Determination Theory approaches have very different views of the process of internalising social norms, although I argue here that they can in fact complement each other in useful ways. To the best of my knowledge, there are no papers explicitly discussing the relationship between SDT and the governmentality approach. I will therefore briefly outline here what the SDT perspective may add to the governmentality approach to analysing active labour market policies.

Foucault's works on governmentality "elaborates the ways in which we are produced and organized as docile bodies, or responsible subjects, in the prison house of modern society" (White, 2014, p. 489). As illustrated by this quote, and the description of modern society as a 'prison house', Foucault is sceptical of the possibility of human liberation. The problem is that "if every response to power is always already circumscribed by it, then, as many commentators have pointed out, there is no real freedom and resistance is pointless" (White, 2014, p. 490).

The SDT perspective can be said to align with the Foucauldian view of power in the sense that it also views social norms as being omnipresent and important for shaping our actions. However, from the SDT perspective, the importance of social norms for guiding behaviour is a basic foundation of human life, as we are social animals and hence have a need for relatedness. This does not mean that freedom, understood as autonomous and competent action, is not possible. What SDT contributes to this discussion is a framework for understanding when social norms are positive for our wellbeing and when they are negative. While social norms set limits for our behaviour, this is not necessarily a violation of autonomy, and hence not problematic from a wellbeing perspective, as long as we accept those social norms as being aligned with our own values and preferences (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Compared to the purely critical analysis provided by governmentality studies, SDT's theory of basic psychological needs therefore provides a conceptual platform that enables analysis of both the positive and negative influences of social norms. As such, the SDT framework enables specific suggestions about practical ways to improve wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Interestingly, Foucault, in his later writings, also began to develop a more positive foundation for understanding what the good life is. His notion of 'the care of the self' comes close to the SDT emphasis on the basic need for autonomy (Foucault, 1997, p. 288). These later writings make up for something that was missing from the governmentality perspective, namely the possibility of human agency, or "the subject as co-creator of her own life, and the possibility of personal transformation" (White 2014, p. 500).

Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 320) describe the strength of SDT as providing a typology of different types of internalisations. This typology explains the qualities of internalisation, and sheds light on why some people internalise social norms that are not good for their wellbeing, while others reject them. As such, the framework explicitly recognises that social norms will often have negative implications for people's wellbeing. However, the key point is that people do not automatically, nor completely, internalise these norms – different people in different situations will internalise them to varying extents.

As such, SDT is not naïve about the potential negative effects of people internalising social norms that do not support their wellbeing, and the fact that “people can internalize just about anything under the right kind of pressures” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the framework can also explain how and why people reject norms instead of internalising them. SDT specifies the kind of value adoption that is unstable versus that which is better anchored, and specifies how variations in the social context account for greater or lesser degrees of internalisation.

While the governmentality approach enables a criticism of power structures in society, it does not enable a positive formulation of how to design policies that improve people’s wellbeing. It would seem to be implicitly based on the value of freedom for the individual, yet leaves little room for agency in practice and therefore does not aid us in formulating strategies for improving people’s wellbeing. On the contrary, SDT has a specific focus on wellbeing and a normative basis in the values of personal growth, integrity, and eudaimonic wellbeing. It provides practical tools for evaluating whether social contexts facilitate or obstruct the fulfilment of psychological needs.

The governmentality approach have been criticised for being too focused on how social structures determine behaviour, leaving little room for human agency (Baadsgaard et al., 2014, p. 159). However, by combining the governmentality approach with SDT’s social-psychological perspective, we can obtain a better understanding of the factors that shape wellbeing, in a way that takes into account both the role of social norms and human agency.

3.3.3. The interactionist perspective

The symbolic interactionist approach is based on the premise that human beings act based on the meanings they attach to phenomena, and that this meaning is socially constructed through interactions (Järvinen, 2020). As such, the interactionist perspective on social norms is closer to the SDT perspective than the governmentality perspective, in that it emphasises the central role of agency. From this perspective our actions are not determined by social norms, as formulated well in the quote in Chapter 2: “Citizens and caseworkers are not ‘predetermined sock-puppets’, but active agents engaged in negotiations about what is going on in the specific situation” (Baadsgaard et al. 2014, p. 159).

The main difference between the SDT perspective and the interactionist perspective is the emphasis on whether values and preferences are more or less fixed within the individual (in SDT) or are socially constructed in specific interactions with other people (interactionism). Despite this apparent divide, both perspectives are more nuanced than this and may not be so far from each other in practice.

SDT's Organismic Integration Theory highlights how social interactions have important implications for how people internalise norms, i.e. whether they are able to personally endorse the value of a certain behaviour. As such, preferences for specific actions are not fixed within each individual, but are socially constructed through interactions. People's responses to norms are not pre-determined, but rather dependant on whether the social context supports basic psychological needs or not and how people choose to respond (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The main difference between the SDT perspective and the interactionist perspective is that the latter sees norms and expectations as negotiated and constructed through interaction. As such, they are not 'internalised' by the individual. This perspective is very fruitful when trying to understand interactions between frontline workers and citizens, as demonstrated by the social policy literature (Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019). As such, the interactionist perspective is useful for understanding how social norms are produced and enacted. However, just as with the governmentality approach, it is not helpful in making the connection between these interactions and the wellbeing of the individual. This is where the main contribution by Self-Determination Theory lies, since its Organismic Integration Theory enables the connection between the way norms are internalised and integrated, and different forms of motivation and wellbeing.

3.3.4. Conclusions

A central assumption in SDT is that people have a basic need for both autonomy and for relatedness. The latter means that we have a natural tendency to want to integrate the social norms of our surroundings in order to 'fit in' and attain a feeling of relatedness with the people who matter to us, as well as with the social groups in which we wish to belong.

However, the theory does not provide tools to help us understand how social norms are produced and enacted. This is where the sociological perspectives of governmentality and symbolic interactionism makes valuable contributions. The two approaches provide very different answers to the question of how social norms are produced. The governmentality perspective provides a macro-perspective by analysing the importance of policies and public discourse. The interactionist perspective provides a micro-perspective, showing how social norms are enacted in interactions between individuals.

What SDT contributes is an understanding of how individuals integrate social norms and how fulfilment of their basic psychological needs contributes to a successful integration process. It also shows how, on the other hand, cir-

cumstances which do not fulfil people's psychological needs lead to problematic forms of integration, and thereby result in less autonomous forms of motivation and lower wellbeing.

Figure 1: Connecting perspectives from governmentality, interactionism, and self-determination theory

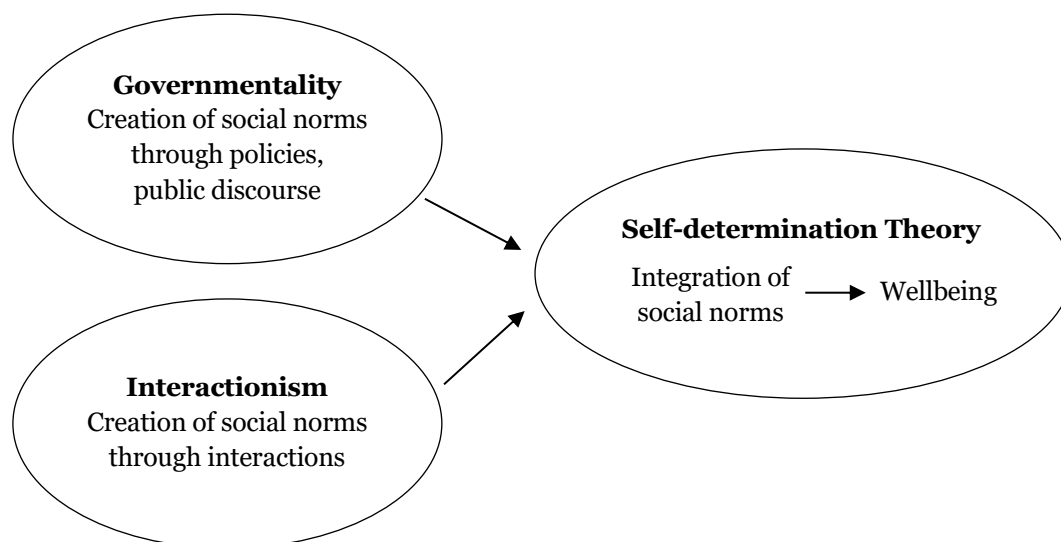


Figure 1 shows, in a very simplified manner, how the SDT perspective may connect with the governmentality and interactionist approaches. The governmentality and interactionism perspectives provide different approaches to understanding where social norms come from, whereas Self-Determination Theory helps us understand when and how they are internalised by individuals and what this means for people's experiences of wellbeing, and for their motivation and actions.

3.4. A framework for understanding the effects of active labour market policies on wellbeing

A central focus of SDT is understanding the way the social world obstructs, or fails to afford opportunities for, the fulfilment of the basic psychological needs. Social environments can be either 'need supportive', 'need depriving', or 'need thwarting'. That is, a specific context can actively support or undermine needs, but it can also be indifferent or passive in relation to one or more needs, and hence 'need depriving' in the sense that it simply does not supply the support necessary to facilitate the fulfilment of a need (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013, p. 6).

SDT has been used to evaluate basic need satisfaction and wellbeing in many different domains. This includes the domain of work, where need satisfaction in workplaces has been used to predict both work-related and personal

wellbeing outcomes, as well as the domains of education and sports (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Many of SDT's propositions about support for the three basic psychological needs come from the context of the relationship between therapists and patients. This context of a relationship between two persons, one of whom is a professional tasked with providing support, and one of whom is in need of support, is clearly also of relevance in the context of active labour market policies, given the importance of the relationship between frontline workers and unemployed citizens. However, there are also many aspects of ALMPs that make it a unique context.

Just as schools should ensure the flourishing of students, and not just provide knowledge or create future workers, ALMPs should also provide an environment that supports unemployed people's wellbeing – and does not undermine it. This is particularly important for the more vulnerable unemployed, many of whom struggle with mental health issues, and are therefore especially vulnerable to the potential need thwarting aspects of the environment.

In the following, I draw on different aspects of SDT, as well as findings from the existing literature, to describe how the context of ALMPs may theoretically support or undermine people's basic psychological needs. I distinguish between three aspects of active labour market policies: a) policy design, b) the process of categorising and deciding on actions (through meetings between case workers and citizens), and c) the actual interventions/activities people participate in. The result is a framework which provides theoretical propositions about the mechanisms linking ALMPs and wellbeing.

3.4.1. Policy design

The design of active labour market policies have potential implications for how ALMPs affect wellbeing. The policy context includes for example the level of benefits, the extent to which behavioural conditionalities are attached to benefits, the kinds of employment people are obliged to accept, the actors involved in implementing policies, and the use of benefit sanctions (Bothfeld & Betzelt, 2011, p. 30).

On the face of it, the welfare conditionalities that current ALMP regimes in most countries entail would not seem supportive of basic psychological needs. Since these conditionalities imply mandatory participation in activities, they are almost by definition controlling, and we would therefore not expect this context to allow fulfilment of basic psychological needs or result in autonomous motivation (Kampen & Tonkens, 2019; Rafass, 2017; Friedli & Stearn, 2015).

At least four mechanisms related to the overall context of welfare conditionalities can be identified. First, a central principle in a welfare conditionality regime is that people's participation in activities is monitored. Unemployed

people are therefore living in a social context where someone else observing them and making judgments about their performance is a central factor. SDT predicts that evaluation of performance is likely to be perceived as a form of external control, and thereby diminish autonomy. Related to this, other studies have found that surveillance similarly reduces intrinsic motivation, most likely because people feel controlled and anticipate being evaluated (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 148).

Second, welfare conditionalities are ultimately implemented through the threat of sanctions that punish non-compliance with demands. SDT posits that threats of punishment will be experienced as controlling. In particular, a threat of punishment contingent on engagement or performance would be expected to have a controlling function, and thus diminish the experience of autonomy and connectedly, wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 147). This expectation is supported by the many existing studies on the effects of sanctions (Dean, 2003; Dorset, 2008; Dwyer et al., 2016; Dwyer & Brights, 2016; Goodwin, 2008; Griggs & Evans, 2010; Peters & Joyce, 2006; Williams, 2021a, 2021b; Wright et al., 2020; Wright & Patrick, 2019).

Third, if people have difficulties understanding the rules and institutions involved in the implementation of ALMPs, this may undermine their sense of competence, since they will experience a lack of structure. The level of complexity and transparency about rules and regulations is therefore likely to have an impact on people's wellbeing.

Fourth, the legal and institutional contexts determining for example the categories benefit recipients are placed in, affect to what extent receiving benefits is experienced as *stigmatising*. The legal and institutional context also has important implications for how social norms of unemployment are developed and expressed, which may also affect experiences of stigma and otherness (Pultz, 2018; Bothfeld et al., 2011). This, in turn, is likely to affect people's experience of being a part of society, i.e. their experience of relatedness as a sense of belonging.

3.4.2. Process

By the term *process* I mean the decision-making processes that lead to concrete decisions about what should happen in a given individual's case. This can refer to decisions about participation in specific interventions, but also for example to decisions about how the individual should be categorised. In practice, these decision-making processes involve interactions between frontline workers and citizens, in the form of physical face-to-face meetings, phone calls, online meetings, and written communications from frontline workers to citizens.

As described in Chapter 2, there is a large social policy literature focused on understanding interactions between frontline workers and citizens, and how these interactions affect citizen experiences of ALMPs. This literature shows how the quality of the encounter between citizens and frontline workers has implications for citizen experiences of agency, self-efficacy, and stigma (Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Sage, 2018; Danneris & Dall, 2017; Marston & McDonald, 2008; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). As mentioned above, even though the overall context of welfare conditionalities may be expected to undermine autonomy and competence, several studies show how the actual effects depend on the nature of the specific interactions between caseworkers and citizens.

As described in Chapter 2, the concept of agency plays a central role in much of the literature on experiences and effects of active labour market policies. However, the concept is often ill-defined and under-theorised (Wright, 2012). The SDT framework is useful for reflecting on the meaning of agency in the context of ALMPs.

The concepts of agency and self-efficacy are closely related to the SDT concept of *competence*, despite agency and autonomy often being used interchangeably. Recall how agency can be defined as the capacity of an individual to affect desired changes to their environment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Compare this to SDT's concept of 'autonomy', which is defined as a sense of willingness and volition with respect to one's behaviour. The two concepts are clearly very different, with autonomy describing an experience of alignment between actions and preferences and agency describing an ability to affect changes to one's environment.

It would seem that 'agency', according to this definition, is more demanding than 'autonomy'. A sense of autonomy merely requires that an individual is able to approve of their actions for themselves, i.e. that one does not feel forced to do something that one does not truly want to do. A feeling of agency on the other hand requires that one has the capacity to change the environment (and in some definitions, to not only have the capacity, but also to act upon it).

In this way, the concept of agency is more related to SDT's concept of competence, which refers to the experience of being able to affect change. In fact, the SDT view of competence is based on the earlier concept of 'effectance motivation', which describes exactly "our natural active tendency to influence the environment" (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 95). What SDT brings to the concept of agency, besides a precise definition, is the theory of basic psychological needs, which takes the further step of explaining why agency is important for well-being.

Self-efficacy is another concept that describes a phenomenon very similar to competence and agency. It refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to change one's social environment (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). In fact, Bandura (2015) describes how "to be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life conditions". Hence, similarly to competence, self-efficacy refers to an individual's subjective perception of ability to change their environment.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the study by Danneris & Dall (2017) examined specifically how interactions between frontline workers and citizens may support citizen experiences of self-efficacy. They find that the caseworker's ability to respond in the right way to citizen expressions of self-efficacy is essential. The study described how caseworkers may either support citizen expressions of self-efficacy, attempt to transfer it to more concrete actions that can increase employability, or challenge it. The latter can mean either trying to improve citizens' sense of their own self-efficacy (up-grading), or trying to decrease it (down-grading). These findings provide a useful corrective to SDT research showing how professionals may improve people's sense of competence, by pointing out that sometimes it might in fact be better for the wellbeing of the citizen if frontline workers challenge a perception of competence that is not well aligned with the individual's actual abilities.

Finally, these concepts are all closely associated with the concept of empowerment, which has been defined as "a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives" (Page & Czuba, 1999). Although the focus in this definition is more on the process leading to agency, the focus on control over one's life is very similar to the concepts of agency, competence, and self-efficacy. In relation to ALMPs, the concept of empowerment has also been used to analyse how policy design can either diminish or promote citizen control over their lives, depending on whether they involve controlling caseworkers, or allow for personalised connections between caseworkers and citizens (Barnes, 2020, pp. 97-98).

As mentioned above, SDT provides predictions about how to support basic psychological needs in the context of therapy. The difference between the relationship between a therapist and her client and that between a caseworker and a citizen, is of course that whereas the therapist need only consider how to improve their client's situation, the caseworker needs to navigate many different (potentially conflicting) concerns. This means that it may be much more difficult for caseworkers to act in autonomy-supportive ways, because they cannot always only take into account the needs of the client; they also have to consider the internal needs of 'the system'. This may in turn be perceived by citizens as the caseworker neglecting their needs and instead trying to steer

them in a particular direction – for example, towards participation in a certain activity, if that is what ‘the system’ requires.

Both the SDT framework and other existing literature emphasises the importance of involving benefit recipients in decision-making processes. Caseworkers may support people’s sense of autonomy by supporting citizen initiatives, and by providing a manageable number of meaningful activities to choose from. Conversely, if caseworkers are very prescriptive in their presentation of relevant activities, and do not support people’s own ideas, this is likely to undermine the unemployed person’s sense of autonomy.

As mentioned above, SDT provides insights in particular into how autonomy can be supported in relationships between two people. Several studies have shown that when people in positions of authority, such as managers and coaches, adopt controlling management styles, it has detrimental effects on the wellbeing of workers and athletes (Bartholomew et al., 2011a; Bartholomew et al., 2011b; Baard et al., 2004). Welfare conditionalities may have a negative effect on relations between frontline workers and benefit recipients by focusing interactions on control, rather than on the provision of relevant support.

Caseworkers may support people’s sense of competence, or agency, by providing positive feedback in a way which is perceived to be conveying useful information about performance (rather than as a way of controlling behaviour). They may also support a sense of competence by supporting people to navigate ‘the system’. Conversely, they may undermine competence by leaving people to navigate administrative burdens, e.g. complex written information, on their own.

Caseworkers may support people’s sense of relatedness by showing empathy and practicing active listening. Conversely, displaying a lack of empathy is likely to undermine the sense of relatedness of citizens towards caseworkers. As such, SDT highlights the importance of a good relationship between frontline workers and citizens for wellbeing. This is in line with the interactionist point that people generally do their best to manage social situations in a way which makes the interaction successful in the sense of preventing embarrassment of oneself or the other person (Goffman, 1973). However, this may also hold importance beyond the relationship itself, as existing literature shows how the relations with frontline workers are important both for citizen feelings of stigmatisation and for their ability to choose the right activities (Del Roy Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Dwyer, 2004; Frost & Hoggett, 2008; Hansen et al., 2014; Manchester & Mumford, 2012.; Rogers-Dillon, 1995; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Watson, 2015; Wright et al., 2020).

Recall how the literature points out that welfare conditionalities may also be detrimental for wellbeing by making benefit recipients neglect their own

needs, forcing them to instead do their best to meet requirements (Caswell & Dall, 2020; Wright & Patrick, 2019). Here, it is clear how an interactionist perspective contributes important insights into how citizen preferences are socially constructed through the interaction with frontline workers. The SDT perspective would see the basic need for relatedness as the fundamental driver of this process, and also highlight how the use of conditionalities and sanctions undermines the autonomy of benefit recipients.

3.4.3. Interventions

Interventions as part of active labour market policies can take a wide variety of forms. However, some of the most common activities include different forms of job placements and skills development courses.

In terms of autonomy, it would be important that people experience a sense of choice over how to carry out the specific tasks involved in an intervention. For example, the work environment of a job placement or the learning environment of a course may be either autonomy-supporting or controlling, as documented by many SDT studies. Another factor that could theoretically be important is that if activities take time and energy away from people doing other activities that are important to them, they may undermine the feeling of autonomy in people's lives more generally (Brady et al., 2015; M. Campbell et al., 2016; Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Hohmeyer & Katrin Hohmeyer, 2012).

In terms of competence, ALMPs can theoretically play an important role by providing both structure to people's lives and useful skills (Jahoda, 1982; Sage, 2018; Strandh, 2001). What's essential is that, in order to support intrinsic motivation, people have to be able to successfully complete most of the tasks they are given (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 153). On the other hand, tasks should also be challenging, since succeeding at something easy will normally not result in intrinsic satisfaction (Ryan & Deci 2017, p. 152-153).

Finding the right balance in activities is therefore important for whether they will support or undermine competence. Activities such as job placements or skills development courses can a) support competence if they provide tasks that are challenging, but which can be successfully completed, b) ignore competence if they provide tasks that are too easy, or c) undermine competence, if they provide tasks that are too hard. Finally, as mentioned above, it matters whether the activities are accepted by the unemployed people themselves, or are imposed on them by others (Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Sage, 2018).

Table 2: Overview of theoretical propositions, linking aspects of active labour market policies to basic psychological needs

	Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Policy	<p>Monitoring creates feelings of being controlled.</p> <p>Threats of sanctions create feelings of being controlled.</p>	<p>Complex rules or lack of transparency may undermine sense of competence as a result of lack of structure.</p>	<p>Policy design may affect whether people experience stigmatisation and how social norms of unemployment are developed and expressed. This is likely to affect people's experience of being a part of society.</p>
Process	<p>Frontline workers may either support or undermine autonomy, depending on whether they focus on controlling compliance with conditionalities and needs of the system, or focus on understanding and supporting citizen needs.</p> <p>Caseworkers may support people's sense of autonomy by supporting people's own initiatives. Conversely, if caseworkers are very prescriptive in their presentation of relevant activities, and do not support people's own ideas, this is likely to undermine the sense of autonomy.</p> <p>Conditionalities may undermine autonomy by making benefit recipients neglect their own needs and instead do their best to meet the requirements.</p>	<p>Caseworkers may support people's sense of competence, or agency, by providing positive feedback in a way which is perceived to be conveying useful information about performance (rather than as a way to control behaviour). They may also support competence by supporting people to navigate the system.</p> <p>Conversely, it may undermine competence if people are subjected to administrative burdens, with e.g. complex written information, and are left to navigate between different sectors and departments on their own.</p>	<p>Caseworkers may support people's sense of relatedness by showing empathy and practicing active listening.</p> <p>Conversely, lack of empathy is likely to undermine the sense of relatedness of citizens towards caseworkers.</p> <p>Caseworkers may ameliorate or reinforce stigmatisation depending on whether they display empathy or act in ways that are perceived as patronising.</p>

Interventions	<p>Autonomy can be supported if people experience a sense of control over how to carry out tasks. Conversely, controlling environments undermine autonomy.</p> <p>Activities may undermine the feeling of autonomy in people's lives more generally, if they take time and energy away from doing other activities which are deemed important by participants.</p> <p>In order to support autonomy, participants should be able to make sense of activities in relation to the larger context of their goals or objectives for their future lives.</p> <p>Activities may support autonomy by improving awareness through e.g. mindfulness exercises.</p>	<p>Activities may support competence by providing structure and skills development. Activities such as job placements or skills development courses can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) support competence if they provide tasks that are challenging, but which can be successfully completed, b) ignore competence if they provide tasks that are too easy, or c) undermine competence, if they provide tasks that are too hard. <p>Finally, as mentioned above, it matters whether the activities are accepted by the unemployed people themselves, or are imposed on them by others.</p>	<p>Activities may support people's experience of relatedness with friends, family, and the wider society, through opportunities for socialising.</p> <p>Activities may also provide a sense of beneficence and thereby support the need of feeling like a valued member of a community or society.</p> <p>Activities may undermine feelings of relatedness by taking away time and energy for socialising with friends and family.</p>
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In terms of relatedness, active labour market policies could theoretically support people's experience of relatedness with friends, family, and the wider society, e.g. by providing a framework for socialising through participation in courses (Björklund et al., 2017). Here, the concept of beneficence is relevant, since participation in activities may support people's sense of contributing to a work community or society, thereby supporting their sense of beneficence. However, it could also be that activation would use up time and energy that would otherwise be spent with friends and family (Brady et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2016).

Based on the existing literature, it is also important that activities are perceived as meaningful by participants (Björklund et al., 2017; Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Sage, 2018). Participants should be able to make sense of activities in relation to the larger context of their goals or objectives for their future lives.

Finally, as mentioned above, awareness can be seen as a foundation for basic need fulfilment and wellbeing. One way to support people to improve their ability to pay attention to both internal and external experiences is through mindfulness exercises (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 267). In the context of ALMPs, the concept of awareness can help understanding for example how psycho-education and mindfulness courses can support young unemployed people's sense of autonomy and facilitate integration and motivation (Koopman et al., 2017; Leamy et al., 2011). Incorporating the concept of awareness into ALMPs would perhaps also explain the value of free time without duties and obligations, in order to allow time for reflection.

Table 2 above provides an overview of a preliminary theoretical framework, linking the mechanisms of active labour market policy, process, and interventions with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

3.5. Conclusions: Implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing

In this chapter I have aimed to adapt the SDT framework to the analysis of active labour market policies, by drawing on the existing literature about aspects of ALMPs of relevance to wellbeing. The aim has been to develop a theoretical framework that is sufficiently general to provide a good basis for cumulative research (Bacharach, 1989, p. 500). As Gerring (2012) argues, a more general theory is usually preferable to a narrower one, since it is able to explain larger parts of the world, and a theoretical framework able to explain different types of phenomena is more useful than one that is only relevant to a single outcome (See also Kuhn, 1978, p. 322).

As such, the contribution of the SDT-based framework is to provide a general theory of active labour market policy implications for wellbeing. In addition, I have attempted in this chapter to show how the SDT framework connects with other concepts, such as agency, self-efficacy, empowerment, and stigma, which are otherwise often isolated and confused in the literature on active labour market policies. I have also linked the SDT framework with other more general approaches, specifically the interactionist and governmentality perspectives. This shows how the framework is commensurable and consistent with other theories in the field, and hence aids the accumulation of knowledge (Gerring, 2012, p. 68; Kuhn, 1978, p. 322).

Table 2 above summarises the theoretical propositions about how different aspects of active labour market policies may support or undermine basic psychological needs. These should be considered as propositions, not hypotheses, i.e. as theoretical statements about the relations between constructs, which are more general, abstract, and all-encompassing than hypotheses (Bacharach, 1989). Since I am working here within an interpretive, qualitative approach, the broad propositions are more useful for my purpose than specific hypotheses about relations between measurable variables. What I am interested in is using these propositions as starting points to explore mechanisms and processes at the individual level, rather than to test general average effects across a population.

Chapters 6-8 will present empirical analysis of the case of young unemployed people in Denmark and their experiences of active labour market policies. The analysis takes the theoretical framework presented here as a starting point, but also engages in inductive analysis to understand the implications of the three different aspects of active labour market policies for young unemployed people's wellbeing. In Chapter 9, I then return to the theoretical framework to discuss the findings of the analysis, the usefulness of the framework, and possible ways forward for further theoretical development in light of my empirical analysis.

Chapter 4:

Research design, data collection, and data analysis

Qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes. With qualitative data, one can preserve chronological flow, see which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations. Then, too, good qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new integrations; they help researchers get beyond initial conceptions and generate or revise conceptual frameworks (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. 2014, p. 7).

An understanding of the influence of human agency, reflexivity, and moral sensibilities on how processes unfold is central to analysis, giving insights into the shifting meanings that processes hold for those who experience and craft them (Neale, 2021, p. 317).

Having presented the motivation and background to the research, reviewed the existing literature, and outlined the theoretical framework, this chapter describes the methodology and methods of the dissertation. I start out by explaining my overall methodological approach, before discussing the specific foci, advantages, and limitations of this approach. I then describe my specific method of longitudinal qualitative research, and the motivation for choosing this particular method.

This section includes reflections on the value of qualitative research, in general, as well as that of a longitudinal perspective, in particular. I then move on to describe in more detail how I have approached data collection and data analysis.

Throughout the chapter, I aim to detail as clearly as possible my process and my reasons for choosing the approaches I have used. The chapter includes the methodological considerations that are generally applicable throughout the dissertation, while I have also included some more specific methodological comments where relevant in each of the analysis chapters.

4.1. Introduction

My starting point for this dissertation was a desire to learn more about how the experience of active labour market policies affects the wellbeing of benefit recipients. Based on this starting point, it was clear to me from the beginning

that, first of all, I was primarily interested in obtaining in-depth data about experiences in a broad sense, in order to be as open as possible to learning new things. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature points in very different directions, hence it was not obvious how to define hypotheses to be tested, as would have been required in a quantitative approach.

In addition, I wanted to understand processes and mechanisms, examining the complexity of experiences, rather than attempting to reduce them to a limited number of measurable variables. Wellbeing is often measured with a limited number of quantitative indicators, sometimes by simply asking people to state a number in response to the question “all things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” This did not seem to me to be a fruitful strategy for understanding the complex ways that people’s life experiences interact with their experience of ALMPs to affect different aspects of wellbeing over time.

Second, the temporal aspect seemed important to me from the beginning. I wanted to get as close as possible to people’s experiences of different aspects of active labour market policies – meetings, decisions, job searching, job placements, courses – as they occurred, in order to understand the thoughts and emotions these activities triggered.

Since the purpose of ALMPs is to assist (or, seen in another light, pressure) people to enter education or employment, I was interested in understanding the changes in people’s experiences over time. Do policies have the intended effects, or do they have unintended side-effects which may instead worsen people’s situation?

Based on these considerations, and inspired by research carried out by Danneris (2016) in Denmark and the Welfare Conditionality study in the UK (Dwyer & Brights, 2016), I decided to adopt a qualitative longitudinal research design. This approach is particularly well suited to generating detailed data about peoples’ experiences over time. I followed a total of 27 young unemployed people in a Danish municipality for a period of about a year, carrying out up to five interviews with each person. This resulted in a total of 75 interviews. In addition, I carried out a limited number of key informant interviews with frontline workers in order to better understand the processes and systems in the case municipality.

Given my interest in examining the relation between ALMPs and wellbeing, I needed to figure out how to unpack the concept of wellbeing. I spent a significant amount of time at the beginning of the process reviewing different theories that might help me better grasp the complexities of the concept. As described in Chapter 3, I finally decided to use Self-Determination Theory and its theorisation on basic psychological needs to help me unpack and understand wellbeing. This provided me with broad themes of inquiry, which

formed the basis for developing the interview guide. I have found SDT to be useful, as it provides a broad framework to serve as a starting point for my inquiry. I discuss the role of theory in my research further below.

4.2. Methodological approach

4.2.1. Researching people's experiences: the interpretive research tradition

Since I am interested in understanding the subjective experiences and meaning-making of benefit recipients, my research is most closely related to an interpretive research tradition (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). There are however also ways in which my approach diverges from some of the ways this tradition is often described, most notably, in the way I see the role of theory.

Below, I describe in more detail how I have used theory in my research and the reasons for this. Here, I want to make a note of theory in relation to the purpose of the research. While I believe that the specific case I study is important in its own right, my aim has also been to make a broader contribution to the theoretical understanding of how ALMPs affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. In the interpretive tradition, at least as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) describe it in their oft-cited (in political science) introduction, there is little interest in the formulation of general theories. Rather, knowledge is considered to be always context specific. However, many authors writing on theorising and the role of theories see the ability of a theory to 'travel' to different contexts, and to make more general claims, as part of what makes a theory useful (Bacharach 1989; Gerring, 2012).

Here, I lean more towards the latter view, in my argument that more generally applicable theory is necessary in order for research on the experiences of ALMPs to be iterative and for individual case studies to speak to each other. I would argue that the absence of more general theory in this area is one of the reasons that the question of how ALMPs affect people's behaviour has become dominated by economists and the rational choice theory of behaviour, despite the limitations of this approach (see also Healy, 2017).

4.2.2. A short note on 'causality'

For some researchers, making causal claims belongs strictly within a quantitative, variance-based tradition, where strategies for causal identification are used to causally connect the variance in an independent variable with the variance in a dependant variable.

Conversely, as mentioned above, researchers working within the interpretive tradition are usually not aiming to make causal claims, but rather focus

on understanding the meaning that people attach to their experiences. There is, however, also a third position, that of critical realism, which applies a realist ontological perspective to qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012). This approach is closer to a process view of causality, as for example also employed in process tracing studies, where causality is not inferred by observing variance in variables, but by observing processes.

As mentioned, my main aim with this study is to understand people's subjective experiences. As such, I am working within the interpretive tradition (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). However, I am interested in moving beyond description to offer explanations – that is, to connect different layers of experiences with each other. As such, it is difficult not to make some kind of causal claims, since all explanation can be said to some extent to involve causal claims. In this way, my position on causality in qualitative research is more aligned with Maxwell (2012), who supports the interpretivist emphasis on the importance of meanings, beliefs, and values, but without completely rejecting the possibility of making causal claims.

However, as Maxwell (2012, p. 41) also notes, “developing causal explanations in a qualitative study is not an easy or straightforward task”. I therefore wish to briefly describe here the kind of causal claims I am making, and the basis for these claims in my data.

In general, I am interested in linking together what can be called different ‘levels’ of experiences, and my approach can be described as a ‘connecting’ analysis (Maxwell, 2012, p. 43). The first level of experience involves a description of a specific event. This may for example be a description of having to provide bank statements as part of the process of applying for benefits. At this level, the experience consists simply of the practical steps involved or actions taken.

The second level involves reflections on thoughts and emotions associated with the specific event. This may for example be a person's description of the process of providing bank statements as unpleasant or intrusive. This is the level at which people attach meanings to their experiences.

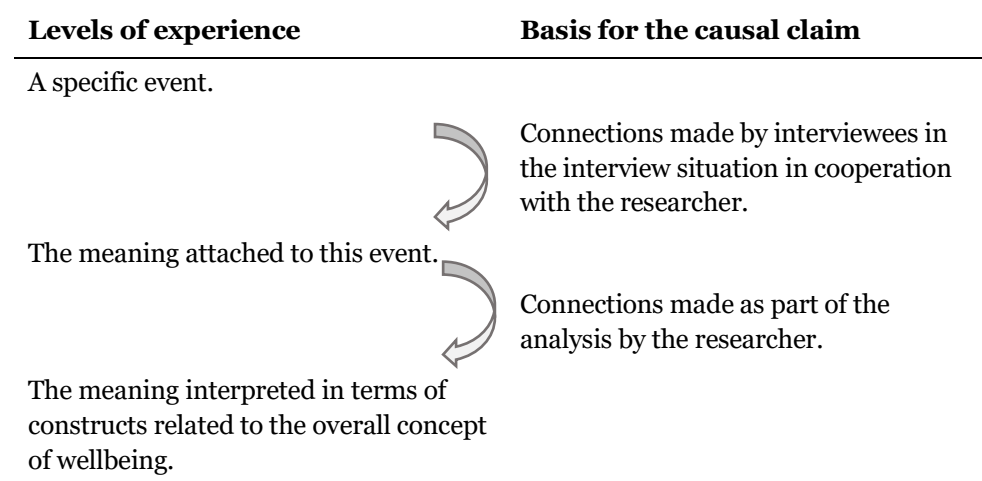
The causal connection between these two levels is constructed in cooperation between the interviewee and me as a researcher in the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p. 53). My role in this process is to encourage the interviewee to reflect, in as open and unguided a manner as possible, on their own thoughts and emotions in relation to a specific event. This is done for example by using prompts such as ‘how did you react to that’, or ‘how did you feel about that’, or ‘what do you mean by that’ in connection with conversations about specific events in the interview situation.

Subsequently, I also play a role in identifying patterns and categories of experiences in the data – for example, patterns in interviewee descriptions of

the process of providing bank statements. However, the causal connection as such has already been made during the interview. The kind of causality involved here is related to what has been called ‘constitutive’ causality within the interpretive tradition. It refers to a causal explanation which “seeks to explain events in terms of actors’ understanding of their own contexts” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p. 52).

Finally, the third level involves linking these thoughts and emotions with the theoretical constructs of basic psychological needs and other concepts. Since these are constructs, described by experience distant concepts (Geertz 1983, p. 57) that are not used in the interview situation, the causal connection here is made as part of the analysis, by me as a researcher, based on a theoretical argument. Figure 2 illustrates how the different levels of experience are connected by causal claims with different bases.

Figure 2: Causality and levels of experience



This analysis therefore claims a causal connection between the specific event, the associated thoughts and emotions, and basic psychological needs. This is based on a process understanding of causality. However, it is not based on a realist ontology, since I am not claiming that any of these causal effects reflect an ‘objective’ reality outside of the subjective experience of the interviewees. In addition, my role as a researcher in the process is apparent.

As should also be apparent from this description these are not strong causal claims; I am not claiming, for example, that the experience of providing bank statements always leads to people feeling that their privacy has been overstepped and hence experiencing lower wellbeing. However, I do mean to suggest that interviewees generally experience the provision of bank statements in a negative way and that it contributes to a general negative evaluation of the experience of the active labour market policy system.

I have tried in this section to nuance the discussion about causality, arguing that there are many different possible understandings of causality and that, rather than rejecting completely the possibility of making causal claims based on interpretive qualitative research, it is more useful to be as clear and transparent as possible about exactly what kind of causal explanations we are offering. As such, my approach, although most closely related to the interpretive tradition, is leaning towards the ‘pragmatic realist’ understanding expressed in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, emphasising the ability of qualitative data to say something about “which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, p. 7).

Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to avoid using language often associated with strong causal claims within the positivist, variance-based tradition, including terms such as ‘effects’ and ‘impacts’. Instead, I may for example say that two different phenomena are ‘associated’ with each other, or that a particular characteristic of the way ALMPs are designed or implemented tend to ‘produce’ a certain experience or feeling. In this way, I have aimed to signal that I am not making strong causal claims, while still offering explanations about how different phenomena may be connected with each other.

4.2.3. Reflections on the use of theory and the abductive approach

Interpretive research typically follows an abductive logic, in the sense that it is neither purely deductive or inductive, but rather involves a continuous movement back and forth between empirical observations and theory (Tavory & Timmermans 2014; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). This approach is particularly well suited to longitudinal qualitative research, since this method offers opportunities for theoretical reflections to take place between the different waves of empirical data collection.

As described in Chapter 3, I made a choice to use the SDT framework at the beginning of my research. This diverges from most studies in the interpretive tradition, which tend to identify theoretical concepts and approaches more inductively once the field research has already been carried out. On the other hand, it is well recognised that most qualitative research designs fall somewhere in-between highly inductive, or ‘loose’ designs, and the more focused, ‘tighter’, designs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 19). Here, I describe the balance I sought to strike between a very loose and a very tight research design. Rather than identify concepts only from the field interviews, I started with a theoretical framework that helped me identify broad themes as a starting point. This

theoretical perspective was then later complemented with more inductive analysis.

The reason I adopted a specific theoretical starting point was that I had from the beginning an interest in learning more about how ALMPs affected the wellbeing of the individuals participating in them. This meant that I did not start the interview process in a completely open-ended manner, with an interest in people's experiences in general. It also meant that I needed a way to unpack and approach the concept of wellbeing. The SDT framework was helpful in this endeavour, as it enabled me to define overall themes likely to be of interest, which helped formulate an interview guide.

At the same time, the framework was sufficiently broad that it did not from the outset restrict my perspective too much. Furthermore, I remained open to findings that did not fit neatly into the framework, which is a risk when adopting a specific theoretical starting point. I have tried to minimise this risk by conducting interviews in a very open manner, allowing interviewees to reflect freely on their experiences, and by analysing data in an inductive manner at first, and only subsequently introducing theoretically derived themes in a more structured coding process.

This approach enabled me to identify new questions and puzzles from the interviews and retain "an openness to the possibility of surprises", following the interpretive approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 33). In fact, there were many such surprises along the way, with some emerging already after the first interviews, while others became apparent during the final process of coding, analysing, and writing up the findings.

As such, the framework presented in Chapter 3 is informed by the results of my analysis and is much more detailed than the framework I was working with at the beginning of my research process. In addition, as will be apparent from the analyses presented in Chapters 6-8, I do engage in the process of generating new concepts and understandings from the data. Table 3 describes the main steps in the process.

Table 3: Steps in the research process

1.	SDT provided a comprehensive yet broad theoretical framework for unpacking the concept of wellbeing.
2.	Based on the existing literature, I adapted SDT to the context of active labour market policies, providing some initial theoretical propositions.
3.	SDT was used to inform the development of interview guides.
4.	Interviews were carried out in an open, semi-structured manner, encouraging interviewees to talk freely about their experiences.
5.	Interview transcripts were coded in an open manner at first, identifying patterns, themes, and connections in the data inductively.
6.	I then searched for new theoretical concepts which seemed useful for analysing and understanding these patterns in the experiences of interviewees.
7.	Follow-up interviews focused on particular topics which appeared to be important based on the analysis of the first interviews.
8.	In writing up the theory chapter, I sought to connect new theoretical concepts and empirical findings with the SDT framework.
9.	The final empirical analyses draws on inductive analysis, utilising concepts from both SDT and other approaches.
10.	The SDT framework was maintained throughout for analysing implications of experiences for wellbeing and motivation.

Another point to note here is that the SDT framework has so far primarily been used as a basis for quantitative studies within a deductive, hypothesis-testing approach. However, it would be a mistake to take this to mean that the theory is better suited to this approach than to a qualitative approach.

As a general theory of human wellbeing and motivation, SDT is in itself method neutral. As Ryan and Deci have noted, from an SDT perspective, human behaviour and experience are understood in terms of the meanings individuals ascribe to events, and hence an interpretive approach focused on meaning is likely to be able to provide relevant insights (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In fact, many previous studies have explored theoretical perspectives based on SDT using qualitative methods (for example Goot et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2021; Jeno et al., 2022; Keenan et al., 2021; Meristo, 2021; Printer, 2021; Sallay et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2019; Wannheden et al., 2021).

As will become clear in the description of the interview process below, I have used SDT as a framework for identifying broad themes of inquiry, not as a guide to formulating specific interview questions as would be the case if developing survey items to use in quantitative studies.

For example, the SDT emphasis on autonomy and agency led me to inquire about interviewees' experience of involvement in decision making during meetings with caseworkers; not simply to gather information about whether

they felt involved or not, but to encourage them to describe how they experienced their own roles and that of caseworkers in the decision-making process. This often opened up complex and nuanced reflections about the way decisions are arrived at, and, for example, the important role of social norms and expectations in the negotiations of roles and responsibilities between interviewees and caseworkers.

As such, the qualitative approach provides a much more open-ended and rich source of data about, for example, autonomy support in caseworker-citizen meetings than what would have been captured in a survey.

4.2.4. Research design

The qualitative methodology provides insights into people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. This approach is particularly useful for understanding people's experiences of ALMPs. Contrary to quantitative effect studies, including randomised controlled trials, qualitative methods can provide detailed processual knowledge about what works, and for whom. In fact, quantitative studies have several shortcomings for understanding the effects of ALMPs, in particular when it comes to vulnerable groups such as young people with mental health issues (Bredgaard, 2015).

First, as described in Chapter 2, there is a large literature showing that the effects of a given intervention depend on relations between citizens and caseworkers. In particular, interventions are only effective if they are personalised and if citizens are involved in choosing which activities to participate in. It therefore makes little sense to try to measure the effects of a specific uniform intervention on outcomes in a quantitative study, which would not provide information about the nature of the interaction between citizens and caseworkers, and which would not allow for an in-depth understanding of user involvement in designing or choosing the intervention.

Second, vulnerable benefit recipients are a very heterogeneous group, with a great variety of different issues. We should therefore not expect a standardised intervention to work for most people in the group, in particular not if it is provided at random, regardless of people's individual needs. Furthermore, there is the issue of timing: different individuals will have different needs at different times, making it even less useful to gather information about the effect of a uniform intervention applied to a randomly selected group of individuals at a fixed point in time.

Third, it is very difficult to attribute outcomes to the treatment, since most people are likely to receive various kinds of support from multiple institutions at the same time, including for example social services and the psychiatric system.

Fourth, for the group of unemployed facing other barriers than unemployment, effective interventions usually need to comprise several different elements, including for example mentoring, various courses, therapy, job placements, etc. This makes it difficult to gain knowledge about exactly which part of the intervention worked for whom in a quantitative design.

All of these challenges mean that we are likely to learn more from a qualitative design than from a quantitative impact evaluation when it comes to understanding how ALMPs affect the wellbeing of vulnerable groups.

Following on from the discussion of causality above, Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) has its foundations within the interpretive tradition, while at the same time being notable for its ability to shed light on complex causal processes (Neale, 2021a, p. 50). Adding the longitudinal aspect means that I am able to access interviewee reflections on their experiences shortly after the events in which I am interested actually took place, meaning their memories of and feelings about the experience are still fresh.

Furthermore, it sheds light on how dynamic processes of entering and exiting unemployment are for these young people. Several participants were hit by completely unexpected and tragic life events during the data collection period. Some were making steady progress, while others had major ups and downs. These dynamics and the interactions between people's shifting needs for support and the activities offered is the subject of the analysis in Chapter 8.

QLR enables analysis of not just “what changes, when or by how much, but how change is created, negotiated, lived and experienced” (Neale, 2021b, p. 654). Rather than simply measuring change, QLR allows us to understand the situated meaning and significance of change to the actors involved. It allows us to understand not just what works, but how things work in different contexts of time and space (Neale, 2021c). As mentioned above, the type of causality involved is one that sees the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences as central for understanding their actions, hence emphasising the importance of agency and subjectivity.

4.2.5. Evaluating qualitative research

There is less agreement on how to assess the quality of research when it comes to qualitative research than for quantitative research. However, it is possible to identify a number of criteria which are often proposed by authors writing on interpretive and qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña 2014; Maxwell 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012).

First, the importance of transparency and reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Researchers should be as transparent as possible about their process, reasoning, and interpretation of their data. Second, reflexivity, which

means showing an awareness of the role of the researcher's own process of sense-making in producing the analysis, and the factors that may be affecting this process. This includes the researcher's positionality, including for example how their gender, age, and previous experience influenced the way data was collected and interpreted (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Third, as is also true for positivist research, validity is a relevant criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, although the term has a slightly different meaning in the qualitative context. Maxwell (2012) distinguishes between descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity. Descriptive validity refers to factual accuracy, in the sense that researchers are not making up or distorting things. This is also described as trustworthiness by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012). Interpretive validity refers to the validity of the researcher's interpretation of the meanings participants attach to things. Finally, theoretical validity refers to the validity of the concepts and categories applied and the validity of the postulated relationships between concepts.

In order to be transparent and allow the reader to ascertain that the analysis faithfully reflect the experiences of interviewees (interpretive validity), I include relatively long excerpts from interviews in the analysis chapters, making it easier for readers to judge for themselves to what extent my interpretations faithfully reflect the experiences of interviewees.

In addition, as described below, at the end of the data collection period, I organised a focus group discussion with research participants in order to ascertain whether they found my overall interpretations of their experiences to be valid and true representations. In relation to reflexivity, I discuss further below my own positionality, and how it may have affected data collection and analysis.

4.3. Data collection

4.3.1. Identification and recruitment of participants

One of the first choices I had to make was which group of unemployed people to focus on, since different groups are subjected to different rules in the Danish system and are likely to have very different experiences, both because of differences in policy and differences in their life situation. I chose to focus on young unemployed people receiving the so-called 'Education Benefit'.

From a case selection perspective, the group of unemployed young people is a most likely case for finding negative effects of welfare conditionalities on wellbeing: most are suffering from some degree of mental illness and/or mental disability and are hence more vulnerable to external pressure. In addition, conditionalities have (at least on paper) been increased particularly for this group, in particular since reforms enacted in 2013.

Based on pilot interviews with two recipients of Education Benefits in the beginning of 2020, I furthermore decided to focus primarily on the group of young people categorised as ‘Education Ready’. The purpose of the pilot interviews was to get an impression of the relevance of the main themes of the interview guide, as well as obtaining information to help decide on the most relevant target group. The pilot interviews revealed that those categorised as ‘Activity Ready’ were less likely to face demands from the Jobcentre, and this helped me to make the choice to focus instead on those categorised as ‘Education Ready’. As described in Chapter 5, those categorised as ‘Education Ready’ are more exposed to disciplinary reforms such as lower benefit levels and threats of sanctions, and face more intense demands.

In addition to these reflections on case selection, further motivation for focusing on the group of young people were that a) there is limited existing research specifically about young people’s experiences of ALMPs, and b) it is particularly critical that this group receives the right assistance, or they may risk remaining on the margins of the labour market for the rest of their lives.

I describe the group of individuals receiving Education Benefits in Denmark in more detail in Chapter 5, and will there also return to the question of what kind of case this constitutes in the Danish and in the international context.

Another aspect of case selection relates to the selection of individuals as cases. Here, my main concern was to ensure as great a variety in starting points and experiences as possible. This meant that from the beginning, I had an aim to include individuals of different ages and genders. However, as is often the case for qualitative research, practical aspects of access meant that in reality, I had limited control over who were recruited in the end.

Recruitment of participants took place in two rounds. In the first round, I initially tried to go through the municipality. This turned out to be more difficult than anticipated, partly because of the organisational complexity of the municipal bureaucracy, where my request was sent around for a while between different departments. When I finally managed to get a decision, it was negative. It probably did not help that this was during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020, when the municipality had to reorganise their activities at short notice, and with many employees sent home. However, I finally managed to get the support from the relevant department through personal connections. Unfortunately, it also turned out to be difficult even for caseworkers to recruit participants, in part because all physical meetings were suspended due to COVID-19. In the end, caseworkers secured a total of five participants.

In order to recruit more participants in this first round, I changed strategy and instead visited three of the external course providers running courses for

the target group. Here I presented my project in person, distributed informational leaflets and encouraged people to participate. The leaflet included information that participants would be rewarded with a DKK 200 voucher for a café (this voucher was also offered to the initial participants recruited through the municipality). This proved to be a more effective recruitment strategy, and I was able to recruit twelve additional participants through this channel. Finally, I also contacted other municipalities to inquire about the possibility of recruiting additional participants here. However, this only resulted in one additional participant from a neighbouring municipality. In total, this first recruitment process resulted in 18 participants.

In a second round of recruitment, I found participants through an experiment with citizen budgets for young unemployed people. The experiment was organised by the local non-profit Center for Social Nytænkning (CFSN), in cooperation with the municipality and with funding from a private foundation.

The project involved making a budget of DKK 25.000 available to a randomly selected group of young unemployed people as a way to introduce a more flexible and unconditional mode of support into the existing active labour market system. As part of the evaluation of the experiment, which I agreed to contribute to, nine participants were recruited by caseworkers for qualitative interviews over a period of two years. It was highlighted by both caseworkers and by myself in the introductory meetings that participation in the qualitative research was voluntary, and that declining to participate would not in any way affect their participation in the pilot project.

Both groups of participants comprised mainly people categorised as ‘Education Ready’, although for some of the participants recruited through courses it was difficult to verify which category they belonged to, and others were re-categorised during the data collection period. The various categories are described in more detail in Chapter 5.

The final number of participants comprised 27 individuals, including 15 men and 12 women. Of these, two were 18-19 years, ten were 20-24 years and 15 were 25-29 years old at the time of recruitment. Only three of the participants did not have either a mental illness (most commonly depression or anxiety) or impairment (most commonly ADHD or autism). Only one participant had children.

I intended from the outset to recruit participants with a more or less equal representation of men and women, and with a spread across age groups. However, as described above, due to the circumstances of recruiting participants it was more of a convenience sampling than a purposive sampling. I did not intentionally recruit participants with mental health issues. However, during a period of low youth unemployment, most young benefit recipients are affected by mental health issues.

In addition, the fact that I recruited a substantial number of participants from course providers providing support for people with mental health issues specifically also meant that this group is most likely overrepresented among my participants. An overview of participants, with information on age, gender, recruitment channel, and number of interviews is available in Appendix D.

Table 4: Overview of research participant sex and age

	18-19	20-24	25-29	Total
Men	1	5	9	15
Women	1	5	6	12
Total	2	10	15	27

As mentioned above, the main concern in the selection of individuals was to achieve as great diversity in starting points and experiences as possible. The recruitment process succeeded in achieving a great variety of starting points (in terms of age, gender, social background, and education levels) as well as rich variety in the experiences described by participants. However, there are some experiences that are likely to have been excluded.

First, those affected by severe depression or anxiety at the time of recruitment would have been unlikely to agree to participate in an interview. Indeed, two participants with social anxiety did not respond to requests for follow-up interviews after the first interview, and while I do not know their reasons, it is likely that it was because their social anxiety made participation too overwhelming.

So, while many participants described being in a state of severe depression in the past (often upon first applying for benefits), and others went through periods of severe depression after I recruited them, I would have been unlikely to recruit people in the midst of severe depression or suffering from severe anxiety. This is therefore not necessarily a bias with regards to the types of individuals, but more with regards to their mental health status at the particular point in time when I recruited them.

Second, as I describe in the analysis in Chapter 7, the interaction between caseworkers and citizens is essential for people being provided with the right intervention. Since I recruited a significant number of participants from various courses, in particular a course provider offering psycho-social support, this means that I recruited people from a pool of benefit recipients with mental health issues who had at this point been offered a relevant intervention. This may mean that I missed out on recruiting some of the people who had not had their mental health issues fully recognised by case workers. This group of people are likely to be those experiencing the most severe negative effects of the

active labour market system on their wellbeing, and hence the most extreme negative experiences may have been left out. In fact, some interviewees did describe having had this experience in the past, when they first applied for benefits.

Third, all participants except one were ethnic Danes, and I am therefore not able to say anything about the experience of benefit recipients with immigrant or ethnic minority background. Immigrants or descendants of immigrants make up 25% of Education Benefit recipients in the case municipality, and these groups are likely to have different experiences than the group of ethnic Danes.¹ Table 5 shows an overview of research participants.

¹ Administrative data from www.jobindsats.dk, data per October 2022.

Table 5: Research participants overview (age, mental health status, and education level at the time of recruitment)

ID	Alias	Sex	Age	Mental illness/ impairment	Education	Recruitment channel	Number of inter-views
ID01	Lærke	F	18	Yes	Completed primary	Municipality	2
ID02	Thomas	M	23	No	Completed secondary	Municipality	5
ID03	Signe	F	26	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	4
ID04	Peter	M	23	No	Completed secondary	Municipality	2
ID05	Jack	M	27	Yes	Completed primary	Municipality	4
ID06	Astrid	F	26	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	1
ID07	Ida	F	23	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
ID08	Michael	M	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
ID09	Sia	F	24	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID10	Anne	F	22	Yes	Completed secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID11	Lotte	F	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Municipality	1
ID12	Jesper	M	25	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 2	2
ID13	Theis	M	22	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID14	Chris- tian	M	29	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 2	2
ID15	Troels	M	24	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 3	1
ID16	Niels	M	29	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
ID17	Bo	M	23	Yes	Interrupted primary ed.	Course provider 2	4
ID18	Julie	F	25	Yes	Completed primary	Course provider 2	2
UB01	Ellen	F	23	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UB02	Pelle	M	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Municipality	2
UB03	Jane	F	25	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UB04	Frederik	M	27	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Municipality	1
UB05	Sarah	F	25	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Municipality	1
UB06	Thor	M	28	No	Completed primary	Municipality	2
UB07	Oscar	M	19	Yes	Interrupted primary	Municipality	3
UB08	Clara	F	23	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UB09	Alfred	M	25	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Municipality	3

4.3.2. Generalisability/transferability

An important question to discuss in relation to the characteristics of my research participants is the extent to which their experiences are relevant for understanding the experiences of other groups of benefit recipients in other contexts.

This aspect is often referred to as generalisability or external validity of the findings, although some interpretivist scholars prefer to talk about transferability (Ericksen, 1986 in Miles et al. 2014; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). One reason for this change of terminology is an argument that it is the person who

seeks to transfer findings from a case study to a new setting who is responsible for assessing the extent to which this transfer is possible or not.

According to this view, the responsibility of the researcher is to provide a sufficiently ‘thick’ description of the nature of the case to enable this assessment of transferability to take place. To this end, the next chapter provides a detailed case description that may guide the reader in an assessment of transferability.

In this section, I briefly consider the generalisability, or transferability, of my findings in terms of internal and external generalisability/transferability, and transferability of the empirical conclusions and theoretical propositions respectively. I will briefly introduce some notes on this issue here, and then revisit the discussion in Chapter 9.

First, with regards to generalisability of the theoretical propositions made in Chapter 3, these are in principle applicable to all active labour market policies which can be meaningfully contained within the three different aspects of the framework (system, process, and interventions). It is possible that there are aspects of ALMPs in a broad sense which do not fall within the framework, for example wage subsidies or occupation policies – in particular since the propositions related to interventions are formulated mainly based on job placements and skills development courses. However, the theoretical propositions in Chapter 3 are formulated in sufficiently broad ways that they can be expected to apply broadly across benefit types and population groups.

Second, when it comes to generalisability of the empirical conclusions, a primary consideration is whether the experiences of my research participants can be generalised to the population of all recipients of Education Benefits in Denmark. This is what Maxwell (2021) refers to as internal generalisation, understood as generalisation within the study population and context.

For this type of generalisation, sampling is critical (Maxwell, 2021). I have tried to address the issue of sampling in relation to internal generalisability above, noting that I believe I have captured a diverse range of experiences likely to cover the experiences of the broader population, at least of those categorised as ‘Education Ready’. As such, I have aimed for maximum variation in the sampling of individuals. My expectation is that the sample is diverse enough to enable the findings to apply broadly within the context of young unemployed people in the Danish context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Miles et. al. 2014, p. 314). Possible exceptions are the most extreme cases of mental health issues as well as ethnic minority groups.

Third, in relation to external transferability of the empirical findings to other groups of benefits recipients and to other contexts, sampling is of limited importance (Maxwell, 2021). Here, the argument of transferability or ‘reader generalisability’ described above is more relevant (Maxwell, 2021). I expect

transferability here to be more limited, given the specific nature of Danish active labour market policies as well as the specific characteristics of the group of young unemployed people. For example, the extensive literature on experiences of active labour market policies in the UK, US and Australia points to very different experiences of benefit recipients.

There are also likely to be limitation as to how well the findings travel from young unemployed people to other groups of benefit recipients, partly because of the very different characteristics, needs, and circumstances of different recipient groups, but also because of the differences in the design and implementation of benefits policies for different categories of recipients.

Young people are likely to be less independent and more likely to accept the authority of ‘grown-ups’ (a recurring notion expressed by interviewees themselves, despite being formally adults themselves). This is particularly the case for individuals in the younger end of the 18-30 years group. Furthermore, young people are less certain about their identity and sense of self, and are hence more likely to be focused on complying with the expectations of others. To use the concepts of SDT, the need for relatedness may be more pronounced than the need for autonomy for this group, relative to older groups. Young people are in a stage of life where they are still trying to figure out how they fit in society and are therefore more likely to experience confusion and be looking for guidance than older groups.

It is also important to highlight again that most participants were suffering from mental health issues or impairments such as ADHD or autism. This means that my findings are particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of this group, but less relevant for benefit recipients with no issues beyond unemployment.

As noted, this does not mean that the theoretical propositions are not relevant, but that the way mechanisms and processes are experienced may vary. Comparative qualitative studies would be relevant to test the generalisability of the theoretical propositions in the future, for example based on qualitative longitudinal data on young benefit recipients in the UK collected as part of the Welfare Conditionality study.

4.3.3. Interviewing

Interviews were carried out in roughly four waves for the first group of participants and three waves for the second group recruited through the citizen budget experiment, with both periods of data collection lasting approximately a year. That being said, interviews were frequently postponed to accommodate the needs of participants, so the waves were not as regular as depicted in Figure 3 below.

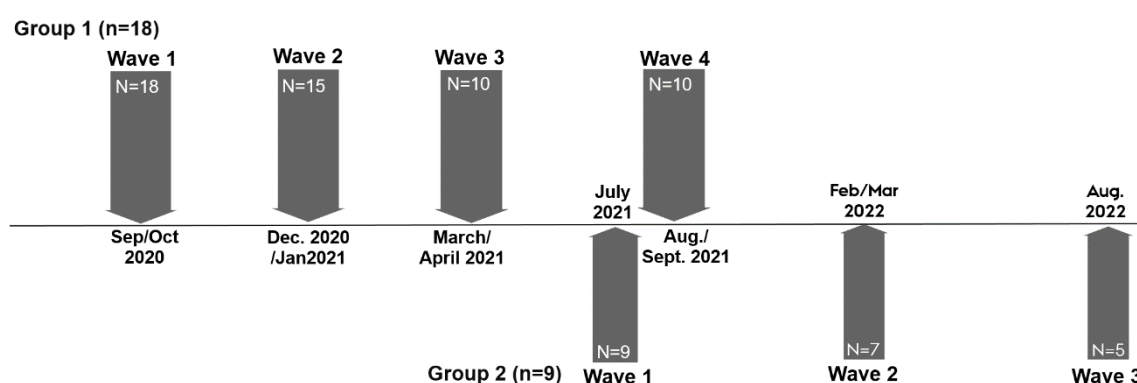
Retention is a main concern when carrying out longitudinal research with vulnerable groups. In particular for the group of young people, their situations often change a lot during a year, and it may therefore not seem relevant for them to keep participating in interviews, once they have moved on in their lives. For this particular target group, their mental health is also a factor that may make some people drop out of the study prematurely (and some participants did so).

In total, 15 participants completed the full round of interviews (four to five interviews for group one, and three interviews for group two). Four participants had either entered education or work by the second interview, and no further follow-up interviews were carried out. However, I followed up via email to check whether they remained in education or employment or re-entered the benefit system again during the data collection period (none of them did so).

Four participants did not return requests for the second interview, and one requested to stop participation because of mental health issues (meaning that in the cases of five participants, I only managed to complete one interview). Two participants were for various reasons hard to plan interviews with, and I therefore only managed to carry out two interviews with them during the data collection period. Finally, two participants in group two either did not reply to my request for a third interview or replied that they had moved on from benefits and did not find it relevant to participate in another interview.

As illustrated in Figure 3 below, this means that for the first group of interviewees, there were 18 participants in wave one, 15 in wave two, and 10 each in waves three and four. For the second group of interviewees, there were nine participants in wave one, seven in wave two, and five in wave three.

Figure 3: Interview waves and number of participants



In total, I carried out 75 interviews. Interviews varied in length, with the initial interviews lasting between one and two hours, and follow-up interviews lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded. All of the first interviews with each individual were carried out face-to-face.

Follow-up interviews were a mix of face-to-face interviews and online interviews carried out using Zoom. I initially started doing Zoom interviews because of COVID-19-related restrictions on physical interviews. However, having experienced it as an acceptable way to carry out interviews, once I had met the interviewee in person at the first interview, I started offering it to participants as an option that they could choose in case they preferred it as less stressful or more convenient than a face-to-face interview.

Prior to the interview, I introduced my research, explaining its purpose and what it would entail to participate. If participants found these terms acceptable, we proceeded to agree on a date for the first interview. For the first interviews, I met with people in person for this initial talk, but I found that it worked just as well to give the first introduction over the phone, and then go over it again in person when meeting for the first interview, rather than arranging to meet for the introduction to the project. Subsequent communication was usually done with text messages, or, in some cases, email.

I always gave interviewees a choice about whether to carry out the interview in a meeting room in a centrally located office space, or at their homes. Some chose to invite me to their homes, while others preferred the other option. I did not ask for their reasons for preferring one over the other, but conceivably, some people found it more comfortable and convenient to carry out the interview in their own homes, while others may have felt that this would violate their sense of privacy.

I did not experience a great difference in the quality of the interviews in one location or the other, although there was perhaps a tendency for the people choosing to stay in their own homes to be slightly more relaxed. Of course it is not possible to ascertain whether they were more relaxed because they were in their own homes, or whether the already more relaxed people were the ones more comfortable with inviting me into their own homes.

I very intentionally aimed to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere for the interviews. I avoided arranging interviews at the university, which would have been an overly formal and perhaps intimidating setting, unlikely to make participants feel relaxed. This is particularly the case for the target group of this project, which are young people without an education, many of whom are likely to have struggled in the education system – with several having had to drop out of university education because of mental illness. The university as a location may therefore risk triggering anxiety about their lack of success in the

education system, and would highlight the difference in educational status between the researcher and the participants.

On the contrary, the shared office space where I borrowed a meeting room was very cosy, decorated almost as a private living room, with rugs on the floor and furnished with old-fashioned second-hand furniture. It was also located in a central location downtown, providing easy access with public transport. I generally wore informal, casual clothes, again in order to create an informal setting for the interview.

I opened the initial interviews by asking people to describe their life history from childhood – where they grew up, where they went to school, etc. The risk of this opening could be that it might mean starting with traumatic experiences and sensitive questions. People did sometimes have traumatic stories to tell. However, in practice this opening turned out to work well as a way of getting people to talk. For most people, talking about growing up meant offering practical descriptions of people and places, rather than the more difficult topics of emotions and trauma. In addition, it may be easier to talk about the past than to reflect on one's situation at present. Such an opening also conveyed my interest in getting to know their personal stories and experiences. It sometimes meant spending a long time before getting to the experiences of active labour market policies, but on the other hand it provided valuable background information for understanding their current experiences.

While I had prepared an interview guide to serve as a background document or checklist (see Appendix B), this only laid out the overall themes, and did not guide the structure of the interview process in practice. Instead, I first established a chronological narrative about the main phases of the interviewee's life up until the present moment. I then used this timeline as a basis for asking more detailed questions about specific events, such as for example the first time they applied for benefits, or participated in specific meetings or activities. This also involved asking for more details about their experience of education, since this usually turned out to be relevant for understanding their reasons for having to apply for benefits, their experiences of interventions, and their barriers to entering education or work.

My general approach was to encourage people to speak as openly about their experiences as possible, prompting them to provide as many details as possible and reflect on their own experiences. While some interviewees were more self-reflective than others, and a few were very difficult to get to open up about their thoughts and feelings, most people – and in particular those who had been attending psycho-education courses and group therapy for a while – were prepared to and very capable of reflecting on their own experiences, thoughts and emotions.

So, while I had the main themes defined in advance, based on the Self-Determination Theory approach to wellbeing, the interviews were in practice relatively unstructured, leaving room for people to talk openly about their experiences.

4.3.4. Positionality

Because of the role the researcher plays in interpretive research, it is important to reflect on how the researcher's personal characteristics may have influenced the data collection and interpretation of the results (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Here, I therefore briefly discuss the ways in which my own positionality may have affected the analyses.

First, I want to acknowledge some of the main experiences that informed my expectations about what I would find when I started interviewing participants. The focus of the research project originally came out of a review of the literature on the effects of active labour market policies on wellbeing, in particular based on the welfare conditionality literature indicating very negative effects of conditionalities on the wellbeing of benefit recipients in the UK. My initial expectations were therefore that interviewees would describe very negative experiences of ALMPs in Denmark.

This expectation was however not generally confirmed in interviews. In fact, most people were quite content with the way they had been treated, and did not find the demands they faced too onerous. This led me to revise my prior expectations, and throughout the process, I have aimed to remain faithful to the experiences related by interviewees, rather than focusing on the more critical perspectives.

As noted above, I took great care to choose my own attire and the locations for interviews in ways that signalled informality and a relaxed atmosphere. This was also an attempt to minimise the power asymmetry between interviewees and myself. The longitudinal qualitative research process affords greater opportunities for building a relationship with research participants than one-off interviews. This is positive, since it means a greater likelihood that as trust is built between the researcher and participant, people will open up about difficult issues. However, it also means getting closer to people's problems, and perhaps feeling even more than one would in a one-off interview, an obligation to help the interviewee with their problems.

In some cases, interviews covered very painful stories and experiences. In such situations, one is never just a researcher conducting an interview, but also a person facing another person. As such, it can be difficult to strike the right balance between allowing people to talk about the issues they deem important, and keeping the interview on track. I handled these situations in dif-

ferent ways, depending on what seemed most sensitive to the needs of the interviewee. For example, two interviewees experienced family tragedies during the data collection period, causing deep trauma and periods of intense grief and depression. I did not exclude these participants from the project, but postponed follow-up interviews.

These interviews turned out to be difficult for different reasons. In one case, an online interview, I chose to cut the interview short, since the interviewee was obviously not feeling well, and did not signal a need or wish to talk about her issues. It was clear that there was no purpose in continuing the interview, and that it would just put unnecessary strain on her in an already difficult situation. I postponed the next follow-up interview longer than usual, to give her more time to recover. At the next interview she was doing much better, and we were able to have a good conversation about how she had experienced the past period, including both her personal feelings, how the Jobcentre had responded to her situation, and her thoughts about the future.

In the other case, I carried out a face-to-face interview at the home of the interviewee, about six months after the event. In this interview, the participant clearly had a need to talk, and talked about her difficulties for several hours. Even though the interview did not focus on experiences with the Jobcentre, and therefore was of limited relevance for my research, it would in this case have been insensitive to her needs to cut the interview short. I did at some point turn off the recorder, since I realised that there was no need to record and transcribe the rest of the interview.

The deeply traumatic experiences of these two participants left a deep impression on me, and created a dilemma about whether to try to help or keep a distance. In the end, I deemed it important in these situations to stick to the researcher role. However, it is inevitable to be emotionally affected by people's stories, some of which also invoked past personal trauma for me, based on my own past experience of being close to someone with mental illness. The common patterns of disrupted childhoods and bullying in many participants' stories also affected me as a father. In the interview situation, my reaction was to show empathy and solidarity with whatever emotions the participants were showing, whether sadness or anger.

Since my interest was to learn about their thoughts and feelings, there was no conflict between the role of researcher and the role of empathetic human being, except insofar as I had an interest as a researcher in limiting the amount of recorded data not relevant to my research. This concern was clearly less important than being sensitive to the needs of participants.

4.3.5. Ethics and accountability

Several ethical concerns should be mentioned in relation to doing research with a group of vulnerable young people. In general, I aimed to be sensitive to the needs of participants throughout the research process, and I always prioritised participants' needs over the needs of my research, based on a 'do no harm' principle (Miles et al., 2014).

First of all, prior to the first interview, I described very clearly the purpose of the research and what it would involve, and made it clear that it would be completely okay to opt out of the project at any point. Each participant signed a consent form outlining these terms in writing, which I also discussed with them in person (see Appendix A). Again, I made it clear to them that they could withdraw this consent at any point.

Despite this, it was clear that some of the people who had signed up for the project found the interview situation uncomfortable. One person described during the interview how she had felt a knot in her stomach the whole day before doing the interview, in connection with describing general issues of social anxiety. This participant did not respond to my request for a follow-up interview, presumably because she found participation too stressful. Another interviewee with social anxiety similarly did not respond to my requests for a follow-up interview.

It is therefore clear that the research was for some a burden and a cause of anxiety, despite my best attempts to avoid this. The only way for me to mitigate this risk was to make sure that people knew that participation was voluntary, and that it was completely ok for them to cancel an interview or opt out of the project whenever they felt like it. I also tried to make the interview situation as comfortable as possible, communicating and behaving in ways aimed at making people feel relaxed and at ease, and making sure to communicate that it was completely acceptable to not answer a question that they may find uncomfortable.

Requesting follow-up interviews involved a balance between my wish to retain as many participants as possible in the study, and the potential wish of participants to be left alone. I generally contacted people via text message, as this was the preferred medium of most participants, and generally followed up with three messages with about a week in-between before giving up if there was no response.

Another ethical concern relates to anonymisation. It can be a challenge to anonymise qualitative data to the extent that people will not be able to recognise themselves. However, I have taken care to anonymise the descriptions and excerpts presented in this dissertation in such a way that others will not be able to identify participants. As such, all names have been changed, but the

aliases are used to refer to the same persons throughout the dissertation, in order to allow the reader to distinguish between individual participants.

Finally, an important concern is accountability. As researchers, we are accountable to the research community that we are part of – and in particular as PhD students, we are accountable to the members of the assessment committee. However, we also need to consider our accountability to research participants. An important part of this accountability is to provide participants with opportunities to correct interpretations of their experiences that they are not able to recognise. In order to provide participants with an opportunity to comment on my main conclusions, I organised a focus group discussion after the data collection period, where I presented my preliminary findings and discussed these with them.

In addition, a primary motivation of research participants for taking part in the project has been to add their experiences to the public debate about ALMPs for unemployed young people in Denmark. I have therefore also deemed it important to communicate my findings to a broader audience, in order to bring the voices of interviewees into the public debate, using my platform as an academic researcher at a respected university.

4.3.6. COVID-19

The recruitment of research participants and the data collection took place during 2020 and 2021 in unprecedented times, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection period included two ‘lockdowns’ of Danish society. This had significant impacts on the experiences of interviewees.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Denmark occurred on 27 February 2020. As of 12 March 2020, a partial suspension of active labour market programmes was in place, suspending caseworker meetings and the obligation for benefit recipients to be available for work and activities. As of 30 March 2020, meetings with caseworkers and some activities were moved online.

This first suspension of activities caused a lot of confusion and extra work for Jobcentres, making it more difficult for me to obtain an agreement about the recruitment of participants. The first interviews, initially planned for spring 2020, therefore did not occur until summer 2020, with the bulk of the initial interviews taking place in September 2020.

Physical activities had become possible again by 20 April 2020, and by 27 May 2020, active labour market programmes, individual meetings, the obligation to be available to work, and sanctions were reinstated. So, by the time the first interviews took place, things were more or less back to normal, except that it was still possible to have caseworker meetings digitally rather than physically. However, this meant that participants’ experiences of ALMPs in the previous six months had been affected by the COVID-19 policies.

In December 2020, another lockdown was announced, putting a halt to all active labour market programmes. This meant for example that all courses either stopped or moved online and that there was a halt on any new job placements being organised. Most participants were therefore affected by this second lockdown in a very significant way, for example by losing the main activities providing structure to their lives. This experience was reflected in the second round of interviews carried out in December 2020 and January 2021.

This second lockdown lasted until April 2021, when a partial re-opening was announced. Around the time of the third round of interviews, people had therefore experienced a long period of no activity, with a lot of uncertainty about when courses would open up again.

These COVID-19 related restrictions on ALMPs clearly affected the experiences of participants. The most obvious consequences were a heightened sense of insecurity about the near future, as well as most likely prolonged trajectories (which I discuss further in Chapter 8). However, because the interview period also included periods with ordinary implementation of policies, not everything about participants' experiences were shaped by the COVID-19 changes. In addition, the variation between periods of suspended activities and ordinary implementation provides an opportunity to examine how people experienced the waiting time resulting from the suspension of activities.

4.4. Data analysis

4.4.1. Transcriptions of interviews

All interviews were transcribed by a team consisting of myself and three student assistants, based on a transcription guide (see Appendix F). Student assistants were provided with guidance in person, and I provided feedback based on their first transcription. This was in order to ensure consistency, in particular with regards to the level of detail. Since I did not plan to carry out linguistic analysis, a balance was struck where each word was transcribed accurately, and signs were included making it possible to identify short and long breaks, but without transcribing every single sound (such as “ehm” and “mhm”) being made. The result was 1,280 pages of transcribed interviews.

4.4.2. Coding interviews

All transcriptions were imported into NVivo. The process of analysis between data collection waves consisted of open coding in NVivo, combined with a less structured process of listening through the recorded interviews, reading through transcripts, and making notes about findings that seemed surprising and/or notable. These findings were then explored further in the next wave of interviews.

As a first step of the final analysis process, I carried out an open coding of nine first-round interviews. Only first-round interviews were selected, as these also included in-depth background information. At this point, I had already been through all transcripts several times, and so had an idea about how to select interviews which represented as great a variety of experiences as possible, as well as those interviews which provided more detailed accounts of experiences. In addition, interviews were selected to include both men and women and representatives of the different age groups, as well as individuals with different levels of education.

The purpose of this first cycle of coding was to inductively identify patterns in the data that may not have been anticipated by the theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2013). As such, I stayed close to the data and did not consider theoretical themes or concepts at this stage (Miles et al., 2014). Table 6 shows an overview of the interviews selected for first cycle open coding.

Table 6: Selected interviews for open coding

Case ID	Sex	Age	Mental health issue/diagnosis	Education
ID01	F	18	Yes	Completed primary
ID02	M	23	No	Completed secondary
ID03	F	26	Yes	Completed secondary
ID04	M	23	No	Completed secondary
ID05	M	27	Yes	Completed primary
ID08	M	28	Yes	Interrupted higher education
ID11	F	28	Yes	Interrupted higher education
ID17	M	23	Yes	Never completed primary
ID18	F	25	Yes	Completed primary

The open coding process resulted in 146 codes. These were then organised into themes, combining the theoretical themes from SDT with new ones developed based on the data, in order to develop a consolidated coding scheme for focused coding (See Appendix G). The coding scheme maintained very broad codes in order to avoid overly fractioning the data (Neale, 2021b). In the final coding scheme for the structured coding, the division of experiences into the three aspects of active labour market policies (policy, process, and interventions), became a central organising principle. This three-pronged division originally emerged from the awareness that experiences of interactions with caseworkers were of a different nature than those of participating in activities.

Based on this broad coding list, I then carried out a second round of closed coding of all the transcripts. Following this, I carried out a separate analysis

for each of the three aspects of ALMPs, using a coding list with more detailed codes.

4.4.3. Analysing changes over time

The kind of thematic coding described above is useful for identifying patterns across cases. However, it is not able to capture changes over time within cases. I therefore used other analytical strategies for analysing changes over time. There is no specific methodology for analysing qualitative longitudinal data, and analytical strategies and tools need to be developed and employed based on what is most relevant for each study (Miles et al., 2014 p. 7; Neale, 2021a).

For this study, I relied in particular on pen portraits, or case stories, and various matrices for capturing changes within-cases and over time (Neale, 2021b). For within-case analysis, I wrote short case profiles for each participant, drawing on information from all interviews carried out with each individual. These followed a broad outline, including sections on background (family, health, values, etc.), overall system experience, process experiences, intervention experiences (courses and job placements), and changes over time (turning points, waiting time, etc.). The profiles also included any particularly important excerpts from interviews. These profiles provided a useful overview of each interviewee's story, including a description of their trajectories previous to and during the data collection period.

I complemented the portraits with matrices in order to provide an overview of the data that facilitated identification of patterns between individuals and over time. For example, in order to analyse trajectories for the analysis presented in Chapter 8, I developed a matrix with individuals in the rows and chronological events in the columns, including early childhood, education, initial benefit experiences, first experience of interventions, second experience of interventions, and so on, ending with their final status by the end of the data collection period and a note summarising key points. This matrix was then used as a basis for developing a typology of trajectories that included each individual's experiences of interventions over time.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to describe as clearly as possible my methodology and methods, and the reasons for making the choices I have made throughout the research process.

I situate the study broadly within the interpretive tradition, with its focus on understanding the meaning that individuals attach to their experiences. However, I also discussed how my understanding of the role of theory and causality may divert from at least some accounts of interpretive research, and

lean more towards a pragmatic realist approach. Regardless of labels, I have aimed to describe clearly what kind of causal claims I am making and why.

I have also outlined the main methods of analysis, including cross-sectional thematic analysis and the tools used for analysing changes over time. The specific approaches used for each analysis is described in the analysis chapters.

The chapter also described how participants were recruited for the research, and how representative the participants can be expected to be in relation to the general population of recipients of Education Benefits in Denmark. In particular, it is important to note the absence of ethnic minority groups among the participants, as well as the fact that mental illness is an important characteristic of the participant group. In the next chapter, I describe the case study in more detail, including a more thorough introduction to the group of young unemployed people receiving Education Benefits.

Chapter 5:

The context of the study:

Active labour market policies for young unemployed people in Denmark

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a brief description of the current active labour market policies in Denmark, and explain how the implementation of these policies is organised, both in general and in the case municipality specifically. I also discuss the characteristics of the Education Benefit and of those who receive it. The purpose of the chapter is not to provide an in-depth analysis of these topics, but rather to enable the reader to place the study in a broader contextual frame, to ease comparison between this case and ALMPs in other countries, as well as between other benefit types and other target groups.

5.2. The policy context

5.2.1. Active labour market policies in Denmark

Danish active labour market policies have gone through significant changes over the years, broadly following the trends, also observed in other countries, of intensifying the use of conditionalities and expanding their use to more target groups (Andersen et al., 2017). Similar to many other OECD countries, Denmark has seen a move towards ALMPs since the 1980s, and since the end of the 1990s, these policies have placed more emphasis on conditionalities and activation (Breidahl & Clement, 2010). The Danish system has traditionally been described as emphasising the human capital development side of ALMPs over the more disciplining policies – at least in a comparative perspective (Breidahl & Clement, 2010). Torfing (1999) described Danish policies in the late 1980s as expressing a particular social democratic and universalistic approach to ALMPs, in contrast to the neoliberal UK and US reforms that placed more focus on the disciplining aspects.

However, Danish policies has also seen a shift over time towards a more disciplinary approach (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). This shift was especially pronounced during the 1990s, and in particular the beginning of the 2000s, with more emphasis on disciplinary elements such as lower benefit levels, increased use of sanctions, and faster use of mandatory activation

(Caswell & Larsen, 2015; Jørgensen, 2009; Lind & Møller, 2006; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023).

When it comes to young people particularly, Lindsay & Mailand (2004) describe broadly similar trajectories in the shift towards a work-first approach in the UK and Denmark in the mid-1990s, with reforms in both countries comprising an apparently contradictory combination of disciplinary elements of conditionalities and sanctions with ‘client-centred training and support for participants’ (Lindsay & Mailand, 2004, p. 195).

In the time since, the UK has gone further down the disciplinary road, while Denmark has maintained the dual focus on the combination of disciplining approaches and user involvement in supportive measures. As such, Denmark as a case exhibits many of the inherent paradoxes and dilemmas arising from this dual focus on disciplining and supportive policies.

Most recently, the use of conditionalities have been broadened to include the more vulnerable unemployed, who face barriers beyond unemployment. However, with this expansion of demands for more vulnerable groups also comes an increased focus on empowerment, user involvement, and the provision of integrated services (Larsen & Andersen, 2019). Hence, the contradictions between the disciplining and supportive parts of the system are alive and well in today’s Danish system. As such, even though the use of conditionalities has been broadened and intensified over time, the Danish case arguably still has far more of an emphasis on supporting the unemployed than the conditionality regime that characterises for example the current UK system (Wright et al., 2020).

This continuing dual purpose is also visible in what has been a cornerstone of all ALMPs in Denmark since the 1990s, namely the direct connection between rights and duties. This principle means in practice that citizens’ rights to activation also entail the duty to participate in this activation, as the practical interpretation of ‘being available to the labour market’.

Reforms of ALMPs in Denmark have been accompanied by a public debate that has at once expressed mistrust of the unemployed, and been very critical of the work of Jobcentres. With regards to the former, two particularly high profile media cases in 2011 served to frame benefit recipients as ‘welfare queens’ and ‘scroungers’, with documented negative effects on the public’s support for welfare benefits and for the wellbeing of the unemployed (Baekgaard et al., 2022). The public discourse problematize receiving benefits without participating in any activities in return (Monrad & Danneris, 2022).

5.2.2. The Education Benefit

Young people have often been the target of reforms introducing more disciplining measures in the Danish benefits system. The principle of rights and

duties was first implemented for young unemployed people in the beginning of the 1990s, prior to being extended to all groups of unemployed. Similarly, in the latest comprehensive round of benefit reforms, which took place in 2013, young unemployed people were a primary target group. These reforms introduced a new benefit type, the so-called 'Education Benefit', for young unemployed people under the age of 30 who do not have an education that provides job market qualifications.

As the name indicates, the main objective of the reform was to have more people complete an education; this was to be achieved by a combination of increased support for, and demands on, the recipient. As such, the reform can be seen as an intensification of the existing rights and duties paradigm. For example, the reform did away with former categories in which it was possible to be categorised as 'temporarily passive'. Following the 2013 reform, everybody has both a right and a duty to be active (Monrad & Danneris, 2022, p. 44). For the group of unemployed young people who have not completed an education, the 2013 reform replaced the previous categories with three new ones: 'Obviously Education Ready', 'Education Ready', and 'Activity Ready', making it clear that everybody is considered ready for something.

The 'Obviously Education Ready' are those who are deemed ready to start education right away. This group must suggest possible education options and apply for enrolment. Until they can start their education, they are required to work to earn their own living. If they do not manage to fulfil this condition, they must work for their Education Benefits in so-called utility jobs ('Nytteindsats'). As such, the emphasis for this group is on full-time activation as quickly as possible, with a distinct move towards a work-first or workfare approach. This group comprises a relatively small proportion of those receiving Education Benefits, about 3% at the time of writing.²

The 'Education Ready' are those deemed 'ready to start education' within a year. This group must work with the local authority to start education as soon as possible, according to an agreed plan ('Uddannelsespålæg'). There is a mandatory test of reading, writing, and math skills, followed by mandatory participation in courses as deemed necessary. The Jobcentre defines an individually tailored plan that should lead to starting an education, including mandatory meetings with caseworkers, as well as various other forms of support. At the time of writing, this group makes up 30% of the total recipients of Education Benefits.

The 'Activity Ready' are those deemed not ready to start education within a year, because of e.g. mental health issues or other barriers. This group must also work with the Jobcentre to start education, following an agreed plan

² Source: www.jobindsats.dk

(‘Uddannelsespålæg’). There are mandatory meetings with caseworkers every second month. This group makes up about 65% of the total recipients of Education Benefits at the time of writing.

Most people are categorised as ‘Education Ready’ at first, unless they face substantial social issues which makes it apparent that they will need support for several years before being able to enrol in education. However, people may then be re-categorised as ‘Activity Ready’ at a later point, if it turns out that they will not be ready to start education within a year after all. In practice, both the Education Ready and the Activity Ready groups comprise people with barriers beyond unemployment (Kvist, 2015).

One major effect of the 2013 reform was a significant lowering of benefit levels, so that those categorised as ‘Education Ready’ receive a benefit only at the level of the government education stipend, which is about half of the normal social assistance benefit.

Those categorised as Activity Ready receive an additional payment as long as they comply with conditionalities, which brings them up to the benefit level of the normal social assistance benefits (less for those below the age of 25).

These new lower benefit levels represented a significant break with existing practice in the Danish benefit system, by providing benefits much lower than previously. In an international perspective, the Danish benefits remain comparatively generous, although it is important to note that they are taxable.

As can be seen from Table 7, it is notable that those categorised as Education Ready, and those below the age of 25, are targeted by the more disciplinary approach, with much lower benefits intended to create a stronger monetary incentive for starting education.

As part of the 2013 reform, conditionalities were also tightened, again including both the right and the duty to participate in activation. One demand which those categorised as Education Ready must meet is to make a plan of how they will start education. This plan must be made at the first meeting with their caseworker, which should be held within a week from their initial application for benefits.

At least two meetings should be held within the first three months. Activation should commence after one month at the latest, and people should be offered continuous activation, with at most four weeks between activities. The aim of activities should be to support the young people to start and complete an education as quickly as possible.

Table 7: 2023 benefit levels, Education Benefit and ordinary social assistance unemployment benefits

Category	Benefit per month, DKK
<i>Social Assistance Unemployment Benefits, including additional benefit for participating in activation</i>	
Below 25 years of age, living with parents	DKK 3,714.00
Below 25 years of age, living independently	DKK 7,699.00
25-30 years of age, living with parents	DKK 11,944.00
25-30 years of age, living independently	DKK 11,944.00
<i>Education Benefit, Education Ready</i>	
Below 30 years of age, living with parents	DKK 2,820.00
Below 30 years of age, living independently	DKK 6,545.00
<i>Education Benefit, Activity Ready, including additional benefit for participating in activation</i>	
Below 25 years of age, living with parents	DKK 3,714.00
Below 25 years of age, living independently	DKK 7,699.00
25-30 years of age, living with parents	DKK 11,944.00
25-30 years of age, living independently	DKK 11,944.00

Source: <https://bm.dk/satser/satser-for-2023/uddannelseshjaelp/>

As is apparent from the above description, there is a strong focus on ensuring continuous activity. In looking only at performance measures, there is therefore a risk that Jobcentres focus solely on formal participation in activation, regardless of whether this activity is meaningful for the citizen. In practice, however, among those categorised as Education Ready, the proportion of people in activation at any given time varied between 47-60% over the 2014-2022 period (with the COVID-19 years of 2020 and 2021 being lower than usual at 47-53% respectively).³

Other measures indicate that over an individual's entire time on benefits, the proportion of time in activation was between 29-34%, with the exception of the COVID-19 years 2020-2022 where it was between 14-23%. These figures demonstrate that in fact, people are likely to spend far more time in-between activation than they are in activation. Looking at the month of March each year, the percentage of people in activation varied between 47% and 60% over the 2014-2022 period. Again, while most people are in activation at any given point, almost half are not.

³ The following data are official administrative data from www.jobindsats.dk, unless indicated otherwise.

Table 8 shows an overview of the different types of interventions and the extent of their usage, as of 2014. More recent administrative data show that interventions for those categorised as Education Ready mainly consist of job placements and various courses.

Table 8: Content of activation interventions for those categorised as ‘Education Ready’

Guidance and clarification (incl. courses)	42%
- Introduction to and clarification about education	67%
- Development of personal competences	25%
- Development of work-related competences	8%
Job placements	36%
- Testing field of work	53%
- Development of work-related competences	34%
- Development of personal competences	13%
Skills development	29%
- Work-related courses	62%
- Reading, writing, and maths courses	24%
- Danish language courses	14%
Reading, writing, and math test	21%
Mentor	14%
- Holistic support	62%
- Support to get ready for education	38%
Exposure to education	10%
Subsidised employment	5%
Holistic support	4%
Job search/CV writing support	2%
Other	6%

Source: Kvist (2014, p. 26) based on analysis of 184 case files.

The various interventions may be used separately or in combination. Participation is mandatory, and non-compliance may be followed by a sanction. Sanctions are typically applied in cases where people do not attend the agreed-upon meetings or activities, although they can also be used in cases of non-compliance such as not searching for jobs, or quitting a job, course, or other type of activation without a valid reason. Those categorised as Activity Ready

can be exempted from sanctions if the caseworker identifies special circumstances (such as mental health issues) as a reason for not complying with conditionalities.

The 2013 reform also increased the use of sanctions (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). The proportion of people in the Education Ready category sanctioned over the 2014-2022 period was 26-30%, with the exception of the COVID-19 years of 2020 and 2021, where the percentage decreased to 19% and 20% respectively.

Sanction levels depends on which benefit level an individual receives. For those categorised as Education Ready who are not caregivers, the standard sanction is DKK 400. The Jobcentre has discretion to assess whether someone has an acceptable reason for e.g. not turning up for a meeting or not attending activation.

In addition to the sanction rules described in Table 9, benefit recipients may lose the right to support entirely for a 3-month period, if they are deemed not to be willing to be available to participate in activation. During this period, they may receive support for the days where they attend an 'open offer' consisting of daily presence at the Jobcentre. If an individual is absent from agreed activities for a month, their case will be closed and they will have to apply for benefits again.

Table 9: Benefit sanctions for those categorised as Education Ready

Offence	Sanction
Quitting employment or subsidised employment without adequate reason	DKK 1,200.00
Not attending job interview	DKK 400 per day
Not attending meeting with rehabilitation team	(until contacting the Jobcentre)
Not booking meeting at Jobcentre within the time set by the Jobcentre	
Not attending activation	DKK 400 per day (until contacting the Jobcentre)
Rejecting activation offer without adequate reason or repeatedly is not attending activation offers	DKK 1,200.00
Not providing notification of absence because of illness as agreed with the Jobcentre	
Quitting education without adequate reason	

Source: <https://star.dk/reformer/aftale-om-enklere-og-skaerpede-sanktioner/>

As is apparent from the table, sanctions are potentially quite large for the group of Education Ready, who are living on very low incomes to begin with.

However, Jobcentres have significant discretion in deciding when to use sanctions and when someone has an adequate reason for not complying with demands.

Recipients of Education Benefits are more at risk of being sanctioned than those on the standard social assistance benefits. In 2021, recipients of Education Benefits (across all three categories) received a total of 25,919 sanctions, corresponding to 0.5 sanctions per individual, compared to 0.34 per individual among those on the standard social assistance benefit (kontanthjælp). In 2019, 22% of recipients of the Education Benefit received a sanction, compared to only 15% of those on the standard social assistance, further indicating how the group of young people are more exposed to disciplining aspects of ALMPs than others.

5.3. The governance and organisational context

5.3.1. Governance of ALMPs in Denmark

Activation policies in Denmark are implemented by municipal Jobcentres, and the autonomy municipalities have to design and implement employment services has increased in recent years (Caswell & Larsen, 2020). The creation of municipal Jobcentres, while apparently a decentralisation reform, was combined with introduction of detailed performance management structures, inspired by new public management – combining decentralised responsibilities with central steering through monitoring, and the possibility of sanctioning municipalities that do not live up to performance indicators (Andersen et al., 2017).

As such, decentralisation has been accompanied by a greater central focus on municipalities achieving outcome measures of getting people into employment. In many municipalities, ‘system’ needs mean that the organisational focus is “on implementation and operation of services rather than the organisational ability to meet citizens’ needs” (Caswell & Larsen, 2020, p. 71). This kind of new public management, and the weight it places on performance measurements, entails a focus on process and timeliness demands. The pressure to fulfil these demands creates a constant dilemma for the frontline workers trying to balance system needs with the needs of citizens (Andersen, 2020).

In general, these reforms can be seen as an effort to reduce the discretion of frontline workers, shifting the load from social work professionals dealing with complex social issues, to caseworkers focused on processing cases according to legislation (Andersen et al., 2017). As such, there has for several decades been a conflict between central policy goals focused on conditionalities and sanctions, and the traditional social work values of personalised support still being practiced at the frontline (Caswell & Larsen, 2015). While the

number of educated social workers has dropped overall, the extent of this trend varies between municipalities, and in general the Danish system is still characterised by a strong cadre of professional social workers (Klindt et al., 2020).

Despite efforts to tighten central control, the Danish active labour market system is still a system with a lot of discretion for municipalities and individual frontline workers. Recently, the tide seems to have shifted even more in this direction, as municipalities are increasingly focusing on delivering integrated services, and increasing co-production and user involvement (Andersen et al., 2017; Caswell & Larsen, 2020). While there are challenges with developing real user involvement within a welfare conditionality system such as the current Danish one, some degree of co-creation is possible when trust is established between caseworkers and citizens (Caswell & Larsen, 2020).

Furthermore, user involvement is still specified in law as a requirement, and an evaluation of the implementation of the 2013 reform showed that about 80% of those categorised as Education Ready felt that they had been involved in decisions about which interventions they received, and 70% felt that the Jobcentre had taken their needs into account (Kvist, 2014).

In conclusion, there is a long-standing conflict between central government goals and strategies aimed at using conditionalities and sanctions to push the unemployed into work or education as quickly as possible, and local professional norms and practices of frontline workers. This conflict is far from settled, and even though the Danish system is on paper based on new public management and strict conditionalities, there is at the same time a high level of discretion and strong professional norms among social workers in Danish Jobcentres (Caswell & Larsen, 2015). The autonomy and discretion allowed municipalities and caseworkers also mean that there is great variation in how policies are implemented at the frontline in practice (Baadsgaard et al., 2014; Caswell, Kleif, Thuesen & Dall, 2012; Eskelinen, Olesen & Caswell, 2008; Olesen, 2008).

5.3.2. Implementation processes in the case municipality

In the case municipality, different departments are responsible for those categorised as 'Education Ready' and 'Activity Ready' respectively. In addition, functions between frontline workers are quite specialised: upon registering for benefits, the young people are first met by a team dedicated only to performing the first screening and assigning citizens to the categories of either Obviously Education Ready, Education Ready, or Activity Ready (depending on age, education level, and vulnerability).

Following this, citizens are assigned a caseworker from the relevant team working with their category. These primary caseworkers are termed ‘Education Consultants’. However, the young people must also have a meeting at a separate Benefits Office dealing only with the monetary aspects of the benefits. This is where they have to document their income and wealth, and have their eligibility for social assistance assessed.

The separation of the Education Consultants from the Benefits Office is an important feature of the organisational setup in the case municipality, as it means that Education Consultants are not responsible for sanctioning citizens. Compliance with demands is reported by either Education Consultants (in the case of meetings), employers (in the case of job placements), or course providers to the Benefits Office which then effectuates the sanction. As such, the young people need to contact the Benefits Office if they wish to challenge the basis of a sanction.

This feature on the one hand means less discretion and more automation in the administration of sanctions, as decisions are made by administrative personnel rather than social workers who know the individual benefit recipient. On the other hand, it shields Education Consultants from having to make sanctioning decisions which are unpopular with citizens, thereby increasing their possibilities of developing a trusting relationship with citizens.

When the young people are deemed ready to start a job placement, they are assigned to a ‘Company Consultant’ who is in charge of cooperating with private and public companies to identify relevant job placements, as well as supporting the young people in their search for work. Finally, when participating in courses, the young people often form quite close relationships with frontline workers at the course providers (in particular when participating in psycho-education courses).

The case municipality has a wide variety of support offers available, and according to the caseworkers interviewed, it is unlikely that anybody in the Jobcentre has a full overview of all the different offers available in the municipality. As such, the offers provided to the young people depends on each caseworker’s knowledge and connections. The Jobcentre has contracts with a number of external course providers, which provide courses with a wide variety of activities, for example creative activities, psycho-social support, Danish language or math classes, education guidance, and job search support. These course providers may also help participants find relevant job placements.

An important issue mentioned by many of the young people is caseworker changes. Jobcentre frontline workers often change, either because people are assigned to different staff when assigned to courses or job placements, or because of staff changes, and this makes it more difficult for a close relationship to develop.

5.4. Young unemployed people without education

5.4.1. Characteristics of young unemployed people without education in Denmark

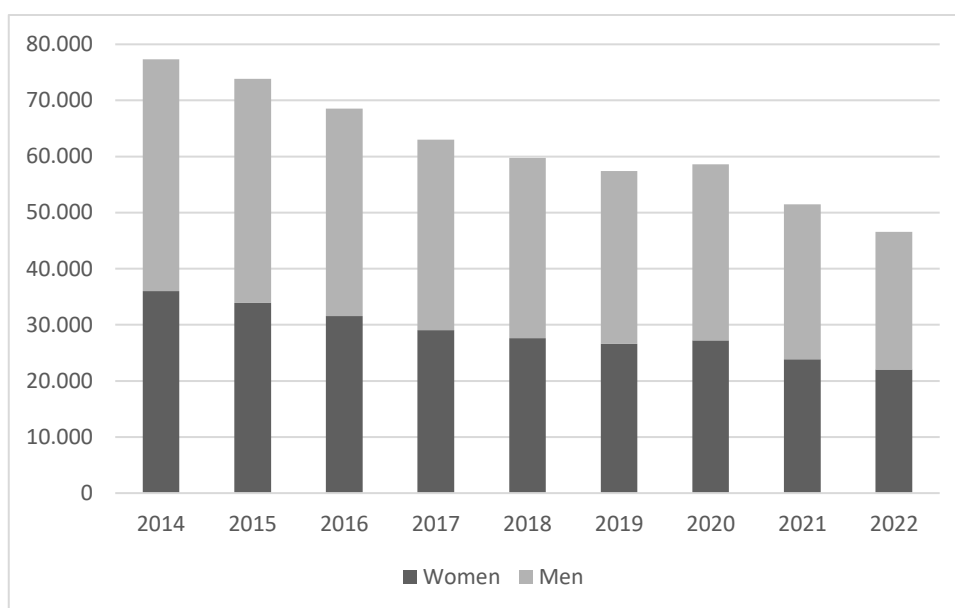
Both internationally and within Denmark, the criteria used to categorise unemployed people as “young” and “without an education” varies. This variance often results in different numbers being used when people describe the extent of the challenge, as some analyses use different age groups and different definitions of education.

For example, it has been highlighted that in Denmark, as of February 2020, there were a total of 76.600 young people aged 15-29 who had no education beyond primary school and were neither enrolled in education nor employed. This corresponds to 8% of the population of 15-29 year olds. About half of this group has not passed their final primary school exams. However, there is also a large group of 25-29 year olds who have completed secondary education, but have not continued their education (Pihl & Jensen, 2021).

Official NEET statistics, including from Statistics Denmark, often operate with an age group of 16-24. However, the population of primary interest in my study is the group of people eligible for the Education Benefit and falling under the remit of the Jobcentre, which covers the age group 18-30. Figure 1 shows the number of men and women who received Education Benefits from the time the new benefit was introduced in 2014 and until 2022. As is apparent from the Figure, the number has been steadily decreasing, as a result of the general decrease in unemployment over this period. The only exception is a slight increase in 2020 as a result of the first COVID-19 lock-down.

Looking across the three categories, the length of time people spend on Education Benefits varies widely: about 30% exit benefits within six months; another 37% receive benefits for between six months and two years, while 33% receive benefits for more than two years.

Figure 4: Number of men and women receiving Education Benefits, 2014-2022



Source: www.jobindsats.dk, 12/02/2022.

A large part of the group receiving Education Benefits have either a disability or mental illness. One study found that, of the group aged 15-24 without work and education, 40% have a disability, with the majority being invisible disabilities or mental illness, such as ADHD, autism, anxiety, and depression (Pihl et al. 2022). It is likely that a larger part of the group are affected but remain undiagnosed. For example, a recent study which carried out a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation of 40 recipients of Education Benefits in a Danish municipality found that 95% fulfilled the diagnostic criteria of a mental disorder (Lindhardt et al., 2022). However, since a similar screening exercise has not been carried out for a representative sample of the population of recipients of the Education Benefits, it is not known which proportion are in fact suffering from mental impairments or illness.

5.4.2. Characteristics of my study participants

As described in Chapter 4, my study participants comprise 27 individuals, including 15 men and 12 women. Of these, two were 18-19 years old, ten were 20-24 years old, and 15 were 25-29 years old at the time of recruitment. In keeping with the general picture of the population of recipients of the Education Benefit, only three participants did not have either a mental illness (most commonly depression or anxiety) or impairment (most commonly ADHD or autism). Only one participant had children. Most of the participants lived independently, although three lived with their parents.

I recruited study participants mainly among those categorised as ‘Education Ready’, although a few were already ‘Activity Ready’ at the time of recruitment, while others were re-categorised from ‘Education Ready’ to ‘Activity Ready’ during the data collection period. In a few cases, I was not able to determine which category participants belonged to, since most participants were recruited through channels other than the municipality, and the young people did not always know themselves which category they belonged to.

Most participants described turbulent childhoods, with divorced parents, frequent moving, and conflicts within the families. Many had experienced bullying throughout primary school, and several described being diagnosed as dyslexic or with ADHD only after finishing primary school. Two participants had been institutionalised as children.

In terms of education, the group is very heterogeneous: two interviewees, aged 19 and 23, were still in the process of completing the last remaining exam needed to complete primary school; seven had only completed primary education; and sixteen had completed secondary education.

One group of participants had struggled through either primary or secondary education, or both, and had yet to complete secondary education. Another large group consisted of people who had done well throughout primary and secondary education in terms of their grades, but who had often struggled socially. This group had often started university shortly after graduating from high school, despite many of them already having experienced mental health issues such as anxiety and depression during high school. They subsequently often struggled through university, before finally having to drop out as a result of mental health issues, usually before being able to finalise their Bachelor’s degree.

An important characteristic of the study participants is that they usually enter the benefits system after a period of time, sometimes several years, of struggling with (often undiagnosed) mental illness. They are therefore experiencing profound crisis when first encountering the benefits system, and usually face a long period of recovery.

The group of Education Ready can be considered a most-likely case for finding negative effects of conditionalities on wellbeing. Although they are categorised as being less vulnerable than the Activity Ready, most suffer from mental impairments or mental illness such as anxiety or depression. At the same time, they are more exposed to disciplining policies, including lower benefit levels, stricter demands for participation in activities and a greater likelihood of being sanctioned. The legislation clearly demarks them as less deserving of support than other groups, since they are in principle ‘Education Ready’ and therefore simply in need of stronger economic incentives in order to become motivated to enter education.

5.5. Conclusions

Despite significant changes over the years, Danish ALMPs remain characterised by the dual objectives of, on the one hand, creating incentives to exit benefits and enter employment or education through disciplining conditionalities and sanctions, and, on the other hand, supporting the unemployed with skills development and other types of support.

This dualism is apparent throughout the system, from the conceptual cornerstone of the ‘rights and duties’ paradigm, to the concrete dilemmas and paradoxes experienced by frontline workers and citizens in the implementation of these policies.

On paper, the system is dominated by a new public management approach with detailed process regulations. However, in practice there remains a high degree of flexibility and discretion for municipal Jobcentres and for the individual caseworkers. Most recently, many municipalities have begun emphasising user involvement and empowerment in their approach to supporting benefit recipients to enter employment or education.

This paradox also characterises the most recent benefit reforms for unemployed people aged 18-29. In line with the disciplining approach, the main focus for this group is getting them to enter and complete education, and the 2013 reforms tightened conditionalities and lowered benefit levels significantly in an effort to achieve these goals. At the same time, there is also a human capital approach in play, with a focus on empowerment, user involvement, and personalised support.

The group of people receiving the Education Benefit is very heterogeneous. Although a large group has not completed primary school exams, there is also a large group of people who have completed secondary education and have subsequently dropped out of university studies. A common characteristic for most people in the group is mental impairments or illness, in particular autism, ADHD, anxiety and depression.

The following chapters present empirical analysis of how different aspects of the complex Danish active labour market system affects these vulnerable young people’s wellbeing over time.

Chapter 6:

Life in ‘The System’

The concept of ‘the sword of Damocles’ is really a very very real thing when you are on benefits. You, or at least I, feel all the time that there is something... some kind of threat, hanging over your head all the time
(Niels, ID16-INT01)

6.1. Introduction

In Chapter 3, I described a framework for analysing active labour market policies, which comprised three different levels of analysis: a) the level of the overall ‘system’ or context; b) the process-level, consisting primarily of encounters between citizens and frontline workers; and c) the intervention level, consisting of experiences of the various types of activation.

This chapter presents an analysis of how people experience the ‘system’, understood as the various rules and regulations that govern life on benefits. I identify five aspects of the overall experience of life in the active labour market system:

- a. Restricted agency
- b. Feeling monitored
- c. Fear of making mistakes
- d. Financial insecurity
- e. Uncertainty

As described in Chapter 3, several aspects of the legal and institutional context may theoretically affect people’s wellbeing, according to the theoretical framework for evaluating active labour market policies, based on self-determination theory (SDT).

SDT’s ‘Basic Psychological Needs Theory’ describes three basic psychological needs that predict wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017 p. 243):

- a. autonomy, understood as ‘being able to approve of one’s actions as aligned with one’s own preferences and values;
- b. competence, understood as ‘the experience that one’s actions have the desired results; and
- c. relatedness, understood as ‘feeling connected and involved with others and having a sense of belonging’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In Chapter 3, I identified at least four theoretical mechanisms describing how the overall context of welfare conditionalities can support or undermine these basic psychological needs, and thereby the wellbeing of benefit recipients.

First of all, a central principle in a welfare conditionality regime, is that people's participation in activities is *monitored*, and non-compliance with demands is punished. Benefit recipients are therefore living in a social context where someone else observing them and making judgments about their performance is a regular part of their lives.

SDT predicts that evaluation of performance is likely to be perceived as a form of external control, and to thereby diminish people's sense of autonomy. Previous studies within the SDT literature have found that surveillance reduces intrinsic motivation, most likely because people feel controlled and anticipate being evaluated (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 148).

Second, welfare conditionalities are ultimately implemented through the *threat of sanctions*. SDT posits that threats of punishment will be experienced as controlling. In particular, a threat of punishment contingent on engagement or performance is expected to have a controlling function, and thus to diminish the experience of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 147).

Third, benefit recipients often find themselves dealing with a great deal of *complexity*. If people experience difficulties understanding the rules and institutions involved in the implementation of active labour market policies, this may undermine their sense of competence, as it makes it difficult for them to predict the consequences of their actions.

Fourth, the legal and institutional context, for example the categories benefit recipients are placed in, affect to what extent receiving benefits is experienced as *stigmatising*. The legal and institutional context also has important implications for how social norms of unemployment are developed and expressed, which may also affect experiences of stigma and otherness (Pultz, 2018; Bothfeld et al., 2011). This, in turn, is likely to affect people's experience of being a part of society, i.e. their experience of relatedness as a sense of belonging.

The distinction between the three levels of analysis – system, process, and intervention level – assumes that it is empirically meaningful to distinguish between benefit recipients' experiences of these three different levels. This seems intuitively clear when it comes to the distinction between process, i.e. encounters with frontline workers and the experience of decision-making processes, and interventions, i.e. the experience of specific activities such as job placements and courses. It is perhaps less intuitively clear that it would be meaningful and practically possible to isolate people's experiences of 'the system' as such.

However, while conducting interviews and through the first process of familiarising myself with the data, it became clear to me that interviewees often distinguish between their experiences of what they call ‘the system’ and the more specific experiences of meetings with caseworkers or participation in job placements or courses.

Usually, this distinction is not to the advantage of ‘the system’: a common sentiment was that they themselves had been very lucky to get a good caseworker, *despite* ‘the system’, but that they knew others who had not been so lucky. Even those interviewees who had only had positive experiences of meetings with caseworkers and participation in activities, and had not experienced any particularly onerous demands, still expressed a negative opinion of ‘the system’, and a desire to be free from it.

It therefore seems both meaningful and important to examine these broad experiences of ‘the system’ as separate from experiences of specific meeting and activities. An analysis of how active labour market policies affect well-being would not be complete without an effort to capture the way the general context of ALMPs and welfare conditionalities sets the scene for the individual encounters with caseworkers and experiences of specific activities. For example, an exclusive focus on the specific encounters between frontline workers and citizens might neglect the fundamental premise of the meeting: that the unemployed are expected to be willing to conform to demands and be motivated to enter education or employment.

Another concern is whether it is practically possible to isolate people’s experiences of ‘the system’. This is not straightforward. First, my primary method for understanding interviewee experiences of the benefits system has been to encourage them to recall and describe in detail *specific* experiences. Most of my data is therefore about specific experiences, based on the prior assumption that the experience of ‘the system’ could be analysed as the sum of the experiences of specific activities and encounters.

However, despite this limitation, it is still possible to identify interview excerpts where interviewees explicitly distinguish between a general experience of ‘the system’ and more specific experiences. In most interviews, I have directly asked interviewees to provide an overall evaluation of their experience of their life on benefits. In other cases, interviewees have of their own accord offered an evaluation of ‘the system’ as a whole, which has often turned out to be at odds with their description of the specific activities and meetings with frontline workers.

Another way to examine this question is to analyse the way interviewees talk about ‘the system’. This concept of ‘the system’ occurs frequently in interviews and in the below analysis, I will try to get closer to a description of the phenomenon people are describing when they talk about ‘the system’.

Finally, another way to get at these experiences is to look at the way interviewees talk about the reasons behind their desire to exit the benefit system in the future. Or, for those who exited the system during the interview period, it is fruitful to consider the differences in how they talk about their lives now, when they are working or studying, versus before, when they were receiving benefits. This can provide revealing descriptions of feelings about the overall experience of living on benefits.

In relation to this, it is of course important to discern between experiences related to active labour market policies specifically and those related to being unemployed more generally. As described in Chapter 2, there is a large literature that documents the detrimental effects of unemployment on wellbeing (Clark et al., 2001; Clark & Oswald, 1994; Lucas et al., 2004; Murphy & Athanassou, 1999; Nordenmark & Strandh, 1999; Winkelmann & Winkelmann, 1998). As such, people's experience of exiting benefits may just as well reflect the experience of moving from unemployment to employment or education.

In the following analysis, I attempt to overcome this challenge by examining people's experiences in as much detail as possible, including how their experiences and emotions are linked to particular features of life both on and off benefits. In practice, it is possible to separate those experiences which are related to exiting unemployment from those that come specifically from exiting the benefits system.

Of course, the analysis still depends on the young people's own descriptions of their experiences, and to some extent on their own accounts of how experiences and emotions are linked to specific events or circumstances. This is a basic premise of the analysis. However, what is important is that the reader can ascertain that the analysis faithfully reflects the experiences of the interviewees. Throughout the analysis, I include relatively long excerpts from interviews, as a way for readers to be able to judge this for themselves.

In practice, the methods employed in this chapter are thematic analysis combined with a thematic matrix analysis, using a matrix with interviewees in the rows, interviews over time in the columns, and transcript excerpts in the cells. All interviews were coded in Nvivo using broad codes which reflected the main categories of analysis related to overall experiences of 'the system', feelings of autonomy, and feelings of competence. These broad codes were used in order to avoid fragmentation of the data and to retain coherence of the case histories over time, rather than breaking up data as in a purely cross-sectional thematic analysis (Neale, 2021a). More detailed coding was subsequently performed in a more inductive manner, and involved structuring and re-structuring the data as the analysis progressed. Coding lists are available in Annex G.

In the following, I present the results of this analysis of how young unemployed people experience life as benefit recipients within the Danish active labour market system. The analysis covers the most salient *general* aspects of the experience of being on benefits, i.e. those experiences that are not connected to a particular experience of meetings or activities.

I start out by providing an account of the young people's descriptions of 'the system' to get a better hold on what exactly this 'system' is. Next, I identify the five most important aspects of the young people's experience of 'the system' and how these aspects relate to the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Finally, I discuss the empirical findings in relation to the existing literature and the theoretical framework, and propose a theoretically-grounded interpretation of the findings.

6.2. What is 'The System'?

In the following, I aim to get a better understanding of what exactly it is the young unemployed people talk about when they talk about 'the system'. What kind of language do they use to describe the phenomenon, and what can this language tell us about the concept of 'the system', as it is experienced by young unemployed people?

6.2.1. Anticipating 'the system'

Individual perceptions of 'the system' do not emerge only when one actually enters the system; rather, people enter the system with pre-conceived ideas and expectations about what it means to apply for benefits.

Since all of my interviewees were already receiving benefits when I recruited them, I did not have access to them right after their first experience of applying for benefits. However, in all interviews, I encouraged people to recall their feelings prior to applying for benefits. For some, this meant recalling events that had happened some months ago, while for others it was several years back. Common for all those who were able to recall their first experience of applying for benefits was that they had very negative expectations of 'the system' prior to applying. Many interviewees described putting it off until they had no other choice.

I was too stubborn [laugh]. I lived with my boyfriend, so I didn't pay rent, and then I had some savings I used. At some point that was used up. And then I had to ... But in all that time I was applying for jobs. Or, well, I tried writing job applications, but I was just in a place where I was feeling really bad. But I don't think I wanted to really acknowledge it. So I just kept trying. Even though I had these blockages. Also because I felt like it was taboo to get into this whole system I think. So it wasn't until March when I ... when I didn't have any more money,

when it started being like, I had to realise that I wasn't getting anywhere (Astrid, ID06-INT01).

Most of the young people described feeling nervous about applying for benefits the first time, because they were unsure about what to expect. In particular, they often had an expectation that they would be required to work full time for their benefits from day one. Interviewees also regularly described feelings of stigma and shame as reasons for putting off applying for benefits. The quote by Astrid above is representative of these descriptions. Another recurring notion was the feeling of doubt about their own deservingness: "am I ill enough to have a right to this?" (Michael, ID08-INT01) or "I was afraid I wasn't entitled to anything" (Lotte, ID11-INT01). Interviewees did generally not have a strong sense that they had a right to receive support.

It was because I had heard these stories from my old municipality, where you heard these horror stories. But I also think it matters that the only thing you hear in society is how bad your caseworker is. It isn't so often you hear a citizen say: 'I have the world's best caseworker.' It is like the fans of two football teams. They just don't like each other in advance (Jesper, ID12-INT01).

As Jesper expresses in the excerpt above, most interviewees had negative expectations of how they would be met by caseworkers. Like Jesper, most people attributed these negative expectations to things they had heard, either through the media or from people they knew who had experienced 'the system' first-hand.

I was quite afraid of the public system before I got into it. My boyfriend has also been quite a lot in the public system, because he also has a pretty heavy psychiatric diagnosis. And my mom has been in the system because she wanted a flex job. It has just seemed like nobody wanted to help you. And that was the attitude I had. That I had to fight to get what I wanted. And that was put to shame somehow. My first caseworker was so sweet and forthcoming, and could see that I wasn't feeling well (Anne, ID10-INT01).

This excerpt by Anne captures well the general negative expectations of most of the young people, as well as how these expectations were disconfirmed when meeting the actual frontline workers. She describes 'the system' as something to be afraid of, based on the previous negative experiences of both her boyfriend and her mother. She was forced to apply for benefits to survive, but expected beforehand to have to fight to get the support she needed. However, contrary to her expectations, she encountered a caseworker who recognised her needs, and provided her with the support she needed without any questions. This experience is typical of the accounts in my data, although there are also a few exceptions with more negative first experiences.

The low expectations are perhaps not surprising, given that there is a pervasive negative debate about the Jobcentres in Denmark. In addition, as Jesper points out, people are perhaps more likely to recount the negative experiences to friends and family, which creates a negative word-of-mouth effect. However, what is more surprising is perhaps that these negative evaluations of ‘the system’ generally did not dissipate over time, despite the positive experiences of the encounter with caseworkers. In the next section, I show in more detail how the young people distinguished between their experiences of ‘the system’ and their experiences of specific encounters and activities, and what this can tell us about the characteristics of ‘the system’.

6.2.2. An inhuman, boring, dry, cold, and inflexible ‘system’

One might think that to understand the experience of ‘the system’ one simply has to understand people’s experiences of the specific encounters and activities that make up ‘the system’. Hansen (2021) quotes Soss (2005, p. 309) for the observation that welfare recipients understand experiences of frontline workers as “an instructive and representative example of their broader relationship with government as a whole”.

However, what is striking in my data is actually how decoupled the evaluation of ‘the system’ is from people’s specific experiences. As mentioned above, ‘the system’ is usually seen as something that is separate from the individual frontline workers, a phenomenon described by Hansen (2021) as ‘bureaucratic decoupling’ and by Nielsen et al. (2022) as a ‘system/actor-based hybrid’ Jobcentre.

Hansen (2021), in his research on unemployed Danes, found that citizens did not hold the “one big system” perception identified by Soss. Instead, frontline workers would often be seen as separate from ‘the system’. While his case study was also on Danish adult recipients of social assistance, the research by Hansen (2021) took place in a very specific setting, namely at work sites where people were in full time activation – the so-called ‘nyttejob’, a Danish version of workfare. Hansen (2021) attributed the phenomenon of ‘bureaucratic decoupling’ to the particular characteristics of this specific site, including the fact that benefit recipients spent a long time working in close proximity to the frontline workers (who were managing the work sites).

However, I find a similar phenomenon in a very different context from what Hansen described, with only brief, infrequent, meetings between citizens and caseworkers, indicating that this phenomenon may be much more widespread. And, in fact the phenomenon has been described in other studies, finding that this kind of ‘bureauphobia’ is not uncommon, is associated with general attitudes of distrust, and often persists despite positive experiences of the public administration (del Pino et al., 2016).

This experience of ‘decoupling’ is apparent for both positive and negative experiences. For example, a negative experience of demands that are perceived as meaningless is often attributed to ‘the system’, and not to the individual caseworker. On the other hand, a positive experience is likely to be attributed to the nature of the caseworker, without necessarily being transferred to people’s evaluation of ‘the system’. Therefore, it would seem that ‘the system’ always loses. Particularly common in my data are accounts that combine positive evaluations of caseworkers with overall negative evaluations of ‘the system’.

Well, she always talks about the different criteria that I have to comply with, ‘well, you know we have to do this’. You know, that’s her job, and it is not cool, that there have to be all these criteria, because she can see on me that my motives are pure in relation to what I should receive. But of course she needs to do what she needs to do. I understand that. It’s her job (Bo, ID17-INT01).

Bo is one of the people who describes a very close relationship with his caseworker, having had the same caseworker for several years, and has only positive things to say about her. Yet, at the same time he has a very negative view of ‘the system’. In the above quote, ‘the system’ is associated with demands, criteria, and rules, which are means of control, and therefore (as explained theoretically by SDT) signals mistrust.

Bo does not associate this mistrust with his caseworker, in part because he experiences the caseworker as deliberately making efforts to distance herself from these rules in the way she explains them to him (saying “well, you know we have to do this”). In another interview, he describes his caseworker as “the mediator between people from outside and the Jobcentre. And I know that she does not necessarily agree with all the protocols that the Jobcentre has”.

An interesting aspect of this is that the rules and demands of ‘the system’ do not in this case undermine the relationship between the citizen and frontline worker, as one might have expected (and as described by some previous studies), because the controlling aspects are attributed to ‘the system’, rather than to the individual frontline worker. ‘The system’ therefore acts as a kind of lightning rod for any negative experiences related to rules and demands that citizens perceive as unfair or meaningless.

However, this is not always the case. In some instances, caseworkers are perceived to be more concerned with the needs of ‘the system’ than with the needs of the interviewees. In these cases, the individual caseworker is still seen as separate from ‘the system’, but rather than being a mediator between citizens and ‘the system’, they are perceived to be ‘serving’ the system.

I think their motivation is somewhat, that they need to do what the system needs, not exactly what I need... I understand that he is maybe busy, but it means that I feel forgotten in the system, or that they just need to complete their bureaucratic demands, and don't focus on the real issues. And that is actually something that I have seen a lot, because if they could have helped me with this security course, then I could search for more jobs and I could get out of the system. There are some things that could be done to deal with the real issues so that I could get out of the system faster, but the system has other things that it wants. They want other metrics, you know. So, it is more important to satisfy the demands of the system than it is to help me with what I really need, if that makes sense (Jack, ID05-INT02).

Here, Jack describes 'the system' almost as a kind of animal that lives off metrics fed to it by caseworkers. It is clear that what he thinks of as 'the system' is a complex of various rules and performance indicators which he perceives to be shaping the behaviour of frontline workers to a greater extent than his own needs.

'The system' is here seen as a kind of competitor, which draws attention away from what Jack experiences as 'the real issues'. He perceives 'the system' as a barrier to getting the help he needs. In this case, 'the system' is in fact detrimental to building a trusting relationship with caseworkers.

As I will cover in more depth in the next chapter, trust is closely aligned with the feeling that the other person has one's interests at heart. Jack is therefore not able to trust a caseworker who he perceives to be more concerned with the needs of 'the system' than with his own needs.

Bo: I remember my first experience of what it was like in there. The atmosphere and such. I didn't like it at all.

Interviewer: Why not?

Bo: I just think it is very dry and boring and feels like ... I don't know. You could clearly see that some of the people sitting there waiting for their caseworker, that they were types in my situation. People had a protective stance against an environment that they were clearly not used to. I just think it was the atmosphere. I wasn't down with it. When I then met [name of caseworker], then I got a big smile on my face. Her I liked (Bo, ID17-INT01).

Bo's conception of 'the system' is tied to the appearance of the Jobcentre. The rules and demands, and hence the feeling of being controlled, is attributed to the Jobcentre. As he describes in the excerpt above, the experience of 'the system' is associated with the specific experience of the physical Jobcentre space as a place that is 'dry', 'boring', and generally unpleasant. An environment that

makes people feel defensive and uncomfortable. Again, the excerpt also highlights very explicitly the juxtaposition between the general experience of the Jobcentre environment and the caseworker.

Niels: The concept of ‘the sword of Damocles’ is really a very very real thing when you are on benefits. This thing that you, at least I feel all the time, that there is something, just a kind of threat, that hangs over your head all the time.

Interviewer: How so?

Niels: For me at least, it is about, if I don’t comply with x demands or something like that, then I might lose my benefits, and then I will become homeless and all that stuff (Niels, ID16-INT01).

In the above quote, Niels describes his experience of the system as associated with a fear of not complying with the rules and losing his income. This description comes after he has just outlined a very positive experience of his caseworker earlier in the same interview, demonstrating again how decoupled this experience of ‘the system’ is from the experience of the individual frontline worker.

The negative experience is associated with a sort of hidden threat, a sword of Damocles, which is always present in the background, not associated with any specific experience of a meeting or activity.

On the contrary, Niels only had positive things to say about his caseworker and the activities in which he has participated. He also found it difficult to describe any specific rule or demand that he experiences as particularly onerous. Yet, the principle of having to comply with complex rules under threat of sanctions, creates the general feeling that a misstep at any time could cause him to lose his income.

It might be just me, but I feel that you stand outside, and you look up, and you see that big building, and you stand here with your little stack of papers, like ‘have I remembered it all’. It is not such an inviting place to come to. Also because you know that it is some big things you have to go in and talk about. You have to pour your heart out, your whole history, right? And that can be a challenge for some, and for me as well, to be sure that you say the right things. And there are also things you probably shouldn’t mention to the municipality, because it closes a lot of doors and so on (Jesper, ID12-INT01).

This excerpt from the interview with Jesper highlights several different things about the way young people perceive ‘the system’. First of all, there is again the feeling of being ‘small’ in front of a ‘big building’. What does it mean to perceive oneself to be ‘small’ in this sense? It is a way to convey feelings of subservience and powerlessness – in other words the imbalance in power felt by the individual citizen compared to ‘the system’. What does it mean to talk

about the 'big building' as a physical representation of 'the system'? The actual physical building which houses this particular Jobcentre is in fact rather large. But Jesper is clearly not just thinking about the actual size of the building. The feeling of largeness conveys a sense of 'the system' as something very complex and difficult to grasp.

In the second part of the excerpt, Jesper emphasises again his feeling of vulnerability in the face of 'the system'. This sense of vulnerability is exacerbated by the sense that 'the system', embodied in this particular quote by 'the municipality', holds certain expectations, and that you have to present yourself in the right way in order to please 'the system'.

Note that this is again not directed at the specific caseworkers – it is about how you present yourself to the impersonal 'system' or 'municipality'. In this sense, his feeling of anxiety is directly related to the behavioural conditionalities attached to receiving benefits. Again, it is apparent that 'the system' is associated with the experience of having to comply with rules and demands. This experience is usually quite abstract; when prompted to describe more specifically what demands they have to comply with, most interviewees find it difficult to describe specific requirements that they perceive as unfair or onerous.

In practice, demands primarily involve being present at meetings and attending courses and job placements as agreed with the caseworkers or course providers. Absence is generally permitted, as long as people call in advance with a reason (and for people with mental health issues, not feeling well because of anxiety or depression is accepted as a reason for not attending).

Most importantly, the young people themselves generally perceive these demands to be fair, and they rarely feel pressured to do something against their will. When they describe the rules and demands of 'the system' as taxing, they are therefore referring to something more nebulous and difficult to describe – a general sense of being under surveillance or being controlled.

This is also related to the difference between 'the system' and the individual frontline workers. 'The system' is dehumanised, an abstract institution devoid of humanity or people. This is contrary to the individual frontline workers who are generally described as 'human beings' and as 'emphatic'. Since the young people's specific experiences are experiences of encounters with frontline workers, their actual experiences are of meeting emphatic human beings, who are not generally seen as representing 'the system'.

Table 10 shows the most common key words used by interviewees to describe frontline workers and 'the system' respectively. While these key words are representative of the majority of frontline worker descriptions, there are also less positive examples.

Table 10: Key words associated with frontline workers and the system respectively

Frontline workers	The system
Humanity	Impersonal
Empathy	Dry
Flexibility	Boring
Trust	Rigid
Agreements	Unforgiving
	Complex
	Rule-based
	Demanding

As we will see in the next chapter, the young people often employ similar language, and a similar distinction, when they talk about the difference between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ caseworkers: the positive encounters are often described using words related to what it means to be ‘human’, and what characterises human relationships, while negative experiences often describe caseworkers that are ‘robotic’.

This speaks perhaps to the importance of the basic psychological need of relatedness, which can only be fulfilled through a relation with another human being, whereas it is not possible to establish a personal relation with the abstract complex of rules and regulations referred to as ‘the system’.

6.2.3. Conclusions: What is ‘The System’?

To summarise the analysis of the young people’s perceptions of ‘the system’, it is clear that most interviewees already held very negative views prior to applying for benefits. Even though these low expectations were not confirmed by the actual meetings with frontline workers in the Jobcentre, the negative views of ‘the system’ persisted during their time on benefits, and remained afterwards for those who exited the benefits system.

This underscores one of the main points of the above analysis: that experiences of ‘the system’, or life on benefits more generally, is not just the sum of the experience of specific events, encounters, or activities. Rather, the experience of ‘the system’ is decoupled from the experiences of specific events, including meeting with individual caseworkers. Caseworkers are generally seen either as mediators between citizens and the system (most commonly), or as servants of the system (less commonly).

‘The system’ itself is perceived as impersonal, which is conceivably part of the reason for the negative experiences associated with it. ‘The system’ is associated with rules and demands, and is characterised as rigid and inflexible. The difference between frontline workers and ‘the system’ is often described

in terms of a dichotomy between human characteristics and characteristics of a machine. In the next section, I take a closer look at what characterises these experiences of ‘the system’.

6.3. The Conditionality Mindset: Young unemployed people’s experience of ‘the system’

In the previous section, we saw how the young people’s general experience of the benefits system cannot be reduced to the sum of their specific experiences. Before looking more at how the specific experiences of the implementation process and the different interventions affect the young people’s wellbeing and motivation, I therefore consider how the overall experience of living in ‘the system’ affects their wellbeing. I argue that a certain ‘conditionality mindset’ can be identified, defined as a mental state characterised by a combination of feelings of restricted agency, the sense of being monitored, the fear of making mistakes, the experience of financial insecurity, and the sense of uncertainty about the future.

6.3.1. Restricted agency

Well, she said that there were these different courses. And I don’t know if there were more things that I haven’t been introduced to. Because it is like, there is no place where you can see ... I think that is the only thing I have been a bit frustrated about, that it is difficult to get an overview of what kind of options there are. Because you need to get that information from them. Or ... I think there was a catalogue or something, but she couldn’t find it. So, I never saw that. But she said that I seemed like the creative type, so there were these things that might be something for me. And you can say that she hit the target pretty much, luckily (Astrid, ID06-INT01).

Astrid describes here a common pattern in the interviews: the experience of not exactly being in control of what should happen, but at the same time feeling that the activities chosen are relatively well aligned with one’s interests. In the terminology of SDT, this points to the fact that ‘the system’ may support autonomy, in the sense that the young people hardly ever feel forced to do something that they do not want to do, and feel (mostly) that they are given choices and agree with the activities.

However, at the same time, they describe themselves as being in a very passive position vis-à-vis ‘the system’ and are rarely pro-active in taking charge of their situation. The difference between a sense of ‘agency’ and ‘autonomy’ is in this case for example the difference between accepting a suggestion for an activity, and coming up with your own suggestions for activities based on reflection on your own preferences.

It seems, from the accounts of interviewees, that ‘the system’ is often capable of supporting a sense of autonomy by providing people with a limited set of choices and by caseworkers engaging in dialogue with the young people about what activities they should participate in (something I will get back to in the next chapter on the implementation process). However, ‘the system’ still imposes many constraints on the young people’s agency, understood as their ability to influence what should happen.

Recall from Chapter 3 that agency can be defined as the capacity of an individual to affect desired changes to their environment. This capacity can then be effectuated to various degrees in practice through actual actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In comparison, autonomy describes an experience of alignment between actions and preferences. Agency can therefore be seen as more demanding than autonomy: a sense of autonomy merely requires that an individual is able to approve of their actions for themselves, i.e. they do not feel forced to do something that they do not truly wish to do.

As discussed in Chapter 3, my position here is that ‘agency’ is closely associated with the SDT concept of ‘competence’. I choose here to use the concept of agency rather than competence, as it is more aligned with general usage to use ‘agency’ to describe people’s capacity to act to change their environment, whereas the word competence is generally understood more as being good at a certain task. In addition, as described in Chapter 2, the concept of agency is much more widely used in the existing literature.

Similarly to the sense of competence, and the basic psychological needs in general, agency is both constrained and enabled by structures such as social roles, rules, and resources (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Agency is not a characteristic of the individual, but something which is negotiated in particular social situations. The question to be examined here is therefore how the context of active labour market policies support or undermine people’s sense of agency. In the following, I will examine the young people’s experiences with regards to this question.

Interviewer: So what happens at the first meeting there? Who is it you meet with, is it just one caseworker?

Thomas: Well, it is someone who is just responsible for saying where people fit in the system.

Interviewer: And how do they assess that?

Thomas: Ehm [exhales], ehm.

Interviewer: Do they ask a lot of questions, or how...?

Thomas: Ehm, I think that we just described my situation in the way that I am not going to write job applications on my own, and I would like to get a job. And

then they were like, ‘okay, well then you obviously should go to the place where you write job applications and where you get job placements in order to get something on your CV.’

Interviewer: But do you know which box you have then been put in?

Thomas: [mumbles] ... not really ... I don’t know what I should call that box.

Interviewer: No. But have they explained anything about how that categorisation happens – what the various offers and demands and so on are in the different ... depending on where you are sent in the system?

Thomas: No. And that is something I don’t think they do very well. Because I have also found out through this municipality what kind of offers about job placements there are and so on. And that also existed in the previous municipality I was in. But I had no idea about the various offers that were there. And that was just bit by bit that I found out, wait, there is also this thing. And it took me four months to find out that if I moved to Aarhus, I could live on my own, which I wanted, on benefits (Thomas, ID02-INT01).

In the excerpt above, Thomas’ language when talking about ‘the system’ is instructive for how the young people generally see their own role as benefit recipients. The language he uses points to a view of himself as having a passive role: ‘they’ decide ‘where you fit’. Even though the experience was largely positive and he felt listened to, this is definitely not an experience of being in the drivers’ seat of the situation – of experiencing agency. One reason for this is the limited information available about the rules, including the rules around categorisations, as well as the various activities that are possible.

Well, I think we just sat and had a little talk, a bit like this one, ehm ... for the caseworker to better understand, well ... ‘what exactly should we do with you. What should I put you on?’ (Lærke, ID02-INT01).

It took almost a month before I was contacted. And I didn’t really know what to do, because ... should I just start applying for jobs? They said, at the same time I think, ‘you can just begin’. But I was a bit like, what if ... or, I don’t know, I had just thought that one should talk to them about what the next logical step was (Peter, ID04-INT01).

In line with Thomas’ account, Lærke explains the purpose of the first meeting with her caseworker as finding out “what we should do with you. What [task] should I put you on [Orig. ‘hvad skal jeg sætte dig til’]”. Again, there is a clear perception of being in a passive position, of having another person do something to you. Interviewees may experience being asked about their needs and wants, but in the end, it is the caseworker who knows what is possible and decides which options should be made available.

At least in the first meetings, the young people find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, not knowing very much about the kind of legislation, rights, duties, or norms which govern the situation. They are asked about their situation, yet do not have sufficient knowledge to actively take charge. As is apparent from the quote by Peter, since they are not clear about their own role and what the rules are, they are often waiting for someone to contact them and tell them what to do. They are unsure about what is expected of them, and hesitant to act without further guidelines as to how they are expected to behave.

Moreover, there is also not an *expectation* that the young people should decide for themselves on for example which category they belong to, or be able to choose from a long list of possible activities. Those decisions are made by the caseworkers based on the information provided by the young people. So, the role of the young people in this situation is fundamentally passive – both in regard to the formation of their own expectations and perceptions, in regard to the expectations of ‘the system’ and the caseworkers.

Another constraint on the young people’s agency is knowledge. In the excerpt above, Thomas has difficulty explaining how the categorisation process works. The purpose of the first meeting is to find out ‘where you fit in the system’. Yet he is not aware of the categories which he may be fit under, nor how these decisions are made. This was a common experience among interviewees, and is clearly something that limits their ability to act to change their environment (for example how they are categorised), and thereby which rights and responsibilities they have to comply with. The lack of clarity about rules and regulations is described in the SDT terminology as a lack of structure, which has been shown to generally impede people’s sense of competence.

According to SDT, provision of choices can support autonomy, if the options are relevant to people and if there are not so many options as to make people feel incapable of choosing between them (which risks thwarting the experience of competence). Many interviewees mentioned a wish for more options to choose from when it comes to deciding which activities to engage in. Most of the young people described being presented with only two options, selected by the caseworker, and most suggested that they would have appreciated being given some form of catalogue with an overview of all the different options. This seems like a simple practical change to better support people’s sense of agency.

There is something paradoxical about how this situation affects people’s sense of autonomy: when asked about the specific experience, interviewees are often positive, saying that they experienced being listened to by caseworkers showing empathy and doing their best to find the best way to help them. The general experience is not of being forced to participate in things they do not

want to do. Yet the fundamental premise of the situation does not allow for the young people to exercise agency: they do not have sufficient knowledge to do so, and there is also not an expectation that they will do so. The expectation is that they are open and willing to share their problems, but not that they are able to actively decide 'where in the system they belong' or to be able to choose freely from an extensive menu of possible activities.

Interviewer: And do you feel that it is your plan, or is it more of a caseworker plan?

Thomas: Well, I guess it is more of a caseworker plan. But that is also mainly because I am in this situation where it is like, I don't have the power to be able to say 'no, I don't want to do that'. And I am also pretty much in agreement with what is in the plan, because it is something that is there to help me find work. So, it is more or less a caseworker plan, but it is also something that we have both agreed what should be in it, so ... (Thomas, ID02-INT01).

The above comment by Thomas is a good illustration of the difference between having a limited sense of autonomy, and having a limited sense of agency. Thomas describes how he does not feel that he is in a position to say no to suggestions made by his caseworker and that the plan they have agreed on (which is documented in an online tool called 'My Plan') is actually more his caseworker's plan than his own.

Yet, he agrees with the content of the plan, and does not feel that he is being forced to do anything he does not want to do. There is therefore no sense of a loss of autonomy as such, but there is also no active ownership of the situation, or any intention to take action to change the situation.

Interviewer: Okay. But it also sounds like it is smart to show in some way that you are motivated, and if you say no to too many things ...

Bo: Yes! It is.

Interviewer: To say no to offers and drop out of too many offers. You said about dropping this rehabilitation activity that you think that would be a problem in relation to showing that you are motivated?

Bo: Yes, yes, yes, exactly. Because in their eyes to be motivated means saying yes to offers. It is a bit of a pity that you have the feeling that you have to talk bullshit when actually you ought to just talk straight from the heart. But I felt ... I was talking straight from the heart, but I also felt that I had to sidestep some sensitive points that could be misunderstood in this short meeting with these strangers, that didn't have my case file. So because of that I had to present the case in a certain way.

Interviewer: Yes, but did you have a clear idea about what they were expecting from you?

Bo: I had an idea ... I don't know if it's the right idea, but I had an idea about what they would like to hear and I could see on their faces that they started to smile when I said things they liked to hear. They would like to hear that they are making a difference of course. Everybody would like to hear that they are at the right place, right?

Interviewer: Yes. But why do you think they insist that you start this rehabilitation course, if you are saying that it's not something you would like to do?

Bo: Now I don't know if it is something they insist on. But they did say that they would really like me to start on it again, and that I should give it a chance again when it becomes possible to attend physically again. Ehm ... so I am not quite clear on whether it is 100 percent a criterion, but it seems like it could be. And the reason ... it is because it is something new that they have started. And they would really like to see people gaining something from it. I assume, because I guess there is also some kind of funding behind it ... I assume (Bo, ID12-INT01).

In this excerpt, Bo explains in details the ambiguity he experiences when it comes to the requirements and demands with which he has to comply. In this particular excerpt, he is describing a meeting, not at the Jobcentre, but with a wider group of different frontline workers who have to assess his eligibility for transitioning from social assistance to another type of benefit related to rehabilitation. However, the excerpt is representative of the way he and others describe trying to anticipate what is expected of them, and how they adapt their behaviour to better comply with these perceived expectations.

As Bo describes, he has an idea about what is expected of him, but is not quite sure whether it is the right idea, or whether there is actually a requirement to comply or not. However, regardless of whether it is just an expectation or an actual demand, he clearly perceives that it is in his own best interest to accept the offer, even if he does not actually have any interest in participating in this particular course.

In this way, he adapts his behaviour to the perceived expectations, even in the absence of any kind of coercion or threat. This is a good example of how a kind of 'soft power' is exercised in the encounter between citizens and case-workers, even without any explicit threat of sanctions being applied.

Bo exhibits agency in the sense that he actively assesses what is expected of him (accepting offers), and which reaction would best serve his own interest of being approved for the type of benefit he wants. However, it is a very restricted form of agency, since he is not able to choose for himself what kind of activity he would like to participate in. This also has consequences for his sense of autonomy, since he agrees to participate in an activity that he in reality has no interest in.

I feel that they have been good at listening to what I wanted. I have for a long time been a bit frustrated that I had to go to so many different places before I ended up at [course]. And I was very frustrated when I couldn't attend FGU anymore. But I have always had a say in where I was going. And maybe there hasn't always been so much to choose from, but I have still been the one who made the decision in the end about what I preferred to do. So I feel that I have had something to say and that they have listened (Ellen, UB01-INT01).

Here, Ellen describes well how she feels that she actually had her sense of autonomy supported in the meetings with caseworkers. She felt that they provided her with options and listened to her, and that she was the one making decisions. However, she also expresses frustration about having limited choices. For example, at the time of this interview, she was following a psycho-education course that she described as extremely beneficial for her personal development. However, prior to this she had been engaged in a variety of other courses, and she now wishes that she had been told about the possibility of doing the psycho-education course much earlier. This is therefore another example where agency is restricted as a result of limited information.

Whereas the experience of autonomy can come from simply being listened to, with someone else making decisions in alignment with your preferences, the experience of agency requires actively making decisions for oneself and taking action to shape the social environment to one's needs. It is evident from the interviewees that the individual encounter with caseworkers can support the experience of *autonomy*, in the limited SDT sense, even though 'the system' does not support *agency*, understood as actually taking action to change one's situation. To the extent that the young people exercise agency, it is usually reactive, as a way to adapt to perceived expectations.

As theorised by SDT, the ability to effectively change one's environment, i.e. to feel a sense of competence or agency, is a basic psychological need. The restrictions on agency in 'the system' would therefore be expected to have negative implications for the young people's wellbeing.

To some extent, my data does bear out this conclusion. However, there seems to be a temporal aspect to this: when first applying for benefits, most of the young people are affected by mental illness such as depression and/or anxiety. This is a constraint on their agency to begin with, which means that they may have limited capacity to take ownership of their situation. At the same time, most experience profound confusion about what they should do with their lives. In this situation, people actually *are* in need of someone to take charge of the situation and help them by providing guidance within a limited set of options.

During their time on benefits, most interviewees experienced an improvement of their mental health as well as enhanced clarity about their wishes for

the future. This may explain why, at the time of exiting the benefits system, they are more critical of the experienced constraints on their agency than they were when they entered the system.

But I think that was also the point for me: let's remove that safety net, because then you are more or less forced to just, if you know what I mean, forced to find a way to survive. And I felt that I had that with the temp job (Michael, IDo8-INTo4).

It has been a bit of a change, but it has been nice. So to speak. All these worries you normally have in the public system, like: 'what if I don't show up' or ... You are responsible for getting out the door and getting going, and you have responsibility for earning your income and so on. So that has given a bit of freedom I would say (Jesper, ID12-INTo2).

When looking specifically at the final interviews with those people who had exited the benefits system, what stands out is how most of these people describe the feeling of exiting the benefits system as one of freedom. As is apparent from the quotes by both Michael and Jesper above, this is connected to a sense of responsibility for one's own life, which seems intimately related to the needs for autonomy and competence. These feelings seem to be associated with not having to be accountable to 'the system' for one's actions. Earning one's own income means not having to worry about whether one is deserving of receiving benefits.

Several of the young people described a sense of ambivalence with the comfort of having a guaranteed income. On the one hand, they appreciated the feeling of a certain financial safety net, but also described a sense of being placed in a passive position, which can be described as a feeling of reduced autonomy, simply due to the fact of receiving benefits, rather than working for a living.

Sia provides a good description of her ambivalent feelings about 'being in the system'. On the one hand, it provides a welcome feeling of safety. On the other hand, there is also a sense of being limited, in particular because of never having any money, and having to ask for permission if she needs anything. She feels this as undermining her autonomy. Of course, the poverty aspect would still be there as a result of unemployment, even without welfare conditionalities, but there is an additional sense of surveillance and having to ask for permission which is related to rules of the system.

Sia: Because it is a bit like ... You have someone who holds your hand, I think. In the way that there is always something to fall back on. Because you have your history written down on a piece of paper, so you can always refer to that and say, 'but I have all of these vulnerabilities here and here and you can see if you read

here and here', so because of that it is a bit of a ... You are being held on a leash by someone. Yes.

Interviewer: You said 'having you hand held' or 'being held on a leash'?

Sia: Yes, yes but in a way it is both, but primarily in a good way I think. It is like you are being caressed a bit, or taken care of, in a way. Or at least, perhaps it is just in my own head, put in the box where you are a bit ... You are not completely ready to stand on your own feet yet, at least you need training wheels or whatever, until you are ready to get out of it again (Sia, ID06-INT04).

In this final interview, Sia has exited benefits, and talks about her experience of several years in the benefits system from that viewpoint. She presents a vivid metaphor for explaining the feeling that others who had exited the system have also described in different ways: the ambivalence of having a safety net, which both means safety, 'having your hand held', but is also associated with a measure of control, 'being held on a leash by someone', a sense of not being fully in control of one's life.

She goes on to explain this feeling using other figures of speech, for instance as somehow being labelled or categorised as a person who still 'needs training wheels'. This is a very apt description that captures the sentiment of most of the young people who exit benefits – both the feeling of being in the system and the feeling of exiting. It is in a way the feeling of being reduced to a child, of the paternalism of 'the system'. The feeling is simultaneously positive, because there are adults there to take care of you, and disempowering, because it supports the notion that you cannot take care of yourself. The language she uses shows clearly the experience of being in a passive position while on benefits.

This association between experiences of receiving benefits, independence, responsibility, and autonomy also appear in interviews of some of the young people who did not manage to exit benefits during the interview period.

At least three interviewees seem to adopt an increasingly passive role during their time on benefits, rather than becoming more independent and empowered. These three all describe how their perception is that they have now made an agreement with the Jobcentre that the Jobcentre is responsible for finding work or job placements for them, and that they therefore do not actively seek work themselves, even though they recognise that they could in theory do so. It is not that they do not feel able to search for work, but rather that this is not part of the role that they perceive for themselves in 'the system'.

It is perhaps this experience of being in a passive role that Michael and Jesper talk about in their descriptions of experiencing a renewed sense of themselves as active and independent actors upon exiting the benefits system

and finding work. In other words, a renewed experience of agency, or competence to change their lives. Thomas provides a similar description of the experience of increased autonomy which accompanies exiting 'the system':

Interviewer: So that means that you have signed out of the Jobcentre or what?

Thomas: Yes, I am out of it. Completely. Which feels pretty good.

Interviewer: Yes, how so?

Thomas: Well, if I want a job now I can focus on finding it myself and trying to set the framework for myself, so 'okay, if it is just to earn money, then I can search according to that.' Plus there isn't these four weeks job placement, so if I want a job I can get the job without saying 'okay, you get four weeks of free labour before'. So in that way it feels good. Also that I have decided to quit my job. Of course, if I had been in the Jobcentre, we would have worked it out. If I had had to talk to them it probably wouldn't have been much different, but then they would have been very keen on 'okay, but then we need to find something else right away.' And it is like, I have a bit of savings I can live off for a couple of months, so I can do things on my own time and find something that actually makes sense for me.

Interviewer: So you feel that you actually have more options now than when you were in the Jobcentre?

Thomas: Yes, actually. And I think it will become more pronounced now after I quit. And especially when I am no longer going to work at the warehouse (Thomas, ID02-INT05).

At this final interview, Thomas is no longer receiving benefits, after having done so for several years. A couple of months prior to the interview, he had finally, after years of applying for jobs and a long string of job placements, gotten a part-time job at a warehouse and exited the benefits system. However, already a few months later, he had decided to quit the job, which consisted of hard and monotonous physical labour. He explained that the work environment was depressing and the location of the work a long bus ride from his home. At the time of the final interview, he describes a renewed sense of optimism as a result of both having exited the benefits system and having decided to quit the job. He expects to be better able to find work on his own, based on this renewed sense of autonomy and agency.

Thomas' account of the experience of increased autonomy as a result of having exited the benefits system is instructive. In the above excerpt, he emphasises the ability to decide the terms of his job search himself, to do things at his own pace, and to focus on finding work that makes sense to him. The implication is that he did not feel that this was possible while being in the benefits system. On the contrary, he felt that he had to act within a particular

framework, which was set by someone else, and that he would be pushed to find work. His account shows the subtle ways that life in ‘the system’ thwarts people’s sense of both competence and autonomy, even when, on the surface, things are not actually that different inside and outside ‘the system’.

6.3.2. Being monitored

Another distinct experience described by most of the young people, is the sense of making oneself vulnerable by having to provide personal information to frontline workers. This is particularly pronounced in relation to the application process, where it is a requirement to provide copies of bank statements in order to prove eligibility. This was generally perceived to be onerous, with many documents, and often requiring a back-and-forth dialogue with the municipality about missing documents.

It is ok. Well, it is a little strange, because they can see it. They know very well. And I have nothing hidden, I have nothing to hide. But it is still like, you are being measured, and then we see how much you can get. And then we can move you on (Peter, ID04-INT01).

I understand why it is necessary, but it was not pleasant. And again it feels like, you are really opening up yourself, when you, you can see here that I spent 100 kroner on whatever that day. It is a strange experience (Ida, INT07-INT01).

The excerpts here are typical of people’s descriptions of the experience of having to document their income and wealth when applying for benefits. It is clear that the documentation process carries with it a feeling of being controlled, and hence also a sense of being suspected of wrongdoing.

Again, this highlights the feeling of vulnerability when facing ‘the system’. Ida mentions that it makes her feel like she is ‘really opening herself up’. In the original Danish, she uses the phrase ‘så blotter man virkelig sig selv’, which connotes vulnerability even more strongly than the English translation, literally meaning to make yourself vulnerable by showing something private.

Sia: There was a lot of ... perhaps it is more a mental thing, but I feel this thing about not having to ask for permission. And, this, ‘oh no, what if I had gotten some money into my account, will somebody check, will somebody want to hear what it is about?’ And I think there was a lot of information they had to have all the time [inhales deeply] ... I just think it was a bit, this is my business, so you have to trust that ... but I know that’s not how it works.

Interviewer: There is in a way a feeling of being monitored and ...

Sia: A little maybe. At least that they are interfering. And I often felt that there was a bit of mistrust and that they were not necessarily that helpful. But I think there may be a difference between ... because the payments office was more strict

than the ones at the Jobcentre. Because those at the Jobcentre is about employment, whereas at the payments office it is just about money. So, I think it is the payments office I primarily have bad experiences with.

Interviewer: Because those are the ones that may look into your account and things like that?

Sia: Yes, and decides if I can have money for something. It is a bit like having to go and ask your mum and dad if you ... uff, I think it is a bit ... yikes, I had a difficult time with that. Having to show them my bank statements and, 'you have some money here', and like: 'yes, but that was because I had to...' Oh, that one I really had a difficult time with. I felt that was embarrassing almost. That was not cool. Then I would rather earn my own money, buy the things I want, like a grown up. Yes (Sia, ID06-INT04).

In this excerpt, Sia describes a certain anxiety related to the fact that she had to be accountable towards the payments office for any income on her accounts. It is worth noting that she did not describe ever having had any kind of official trouble because of this, but what counts is the feeling of being monitored. It is the feeling of having someone intrude in your private space: as she says, 'this is my business.' As she described, the experience is associated with feelings of embarrassment and distrust. There is a feeling of lack of autonomy as well, that she compares to the feeling of a child who has to ask her parents for money.

Well, we are told every day that it ... it is 9 o'clock, or else we take your money. But nobody has had their money taken yet. But it is the fact that they have to talk about it I find annoying. So, for example I get in half an hour before, because it is easier for me to be there half an hour before. And then it is annoying for me to be told every morning that 'you have to be here on time, because else we will take your money.' That's a bit ... then I can become contrarian in the end and say like, then I will come five minutes too late, just to see what will happen or something. Then I might challenge it a bit (Jesper, ID12-INT1).

In this quote, Jesper points to another way the young people experience being monitored, namely by course providers registering attention. How this is being done, and how it is perceived by the young people varies between course providers. When it is done very rigorously, as described by Jesper, it carries with it a sense of control and mistrust.

6.3.3. Fear of making mistakes

'Autonomy' in the SDT definition means living according to one's own desires. This can be difficult under a system of welfare conditionalities, because of the controlling aspects of having to conform to expectations under threat of sanctions. Based on my data, the threat of sanctions is not generally something

that features heavily in the experiences of the young people. However, we have already seen a few examples of how the threat of sanctions can affect people's wellbeing.

I know that many are careful about what they talk about, because you are afraid of getting deductions from your income or ... yes. That there will be some kind of sanction against you. And that is probably the greatest fear for me, and I think it is for others as well. It is this thing about whether you have enough for the rest of the month. What if I am deducted today? And here [at the course provider] if you are ten minutes late you are deducted. That is a bit ... I don't think that would happen at a work place, that you are threatened with consequences because you are ten minutes late (Jesper, ID12-INT01).

This quote by Jesper illustrates how the system of welfare conditionalities makes people change their behaviour according to their perceived expectations. This reduces the experience of autonomy, since it means deviating from your natural behaviour in order to conform to the expectations of 'the system'.

Another aspect of 'the system' is that it can for some people feel very threatening. Again, this is not linked to any specific experiences with caseworkers, but rather to the experience of a complex system, where making a mistake can potentially result in losing one's income.

Michael: Well, first of all, it is very stressful, because it seems like ... well ... that it is a bit more rigid when we get down into these rules, you know. So it seems more rigid, and it seems like the stakes are higher. And now I have to remember all this. I had made a folder with dividers where I had the various sheets to make sure that I had everything, and you know, had printed all this stuff. And I pretty much didn't need it. So I had over-prepared.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Michael: Because I was simply afraid of having made some kind of mistake that meant that it would delay the process. I remember the caseworker I was assigned, in our last meeting she said: 'Michael, I just want to say to you: relax a bit, because you...' you know, I had a notebook with me to every meeting with her, right? Where she was a bit like, relax, it will be alright, right? So perhaps I have also been a bit, not neurotic, but a bit, where it had to be proper and I had to have everything under control (Michael, ID08-INT01).

In this excerpt, Michael describes his fear of making mistakes as arising from a sense that the rules are 'more rigid' and that 'the stakes are higher'. In other words, he has a sense that he could easily make a mistake, that there would be no flexibility if he did so, and that the consequences may be severe. He describes this as a great source of stress. As a coping mechanism, a way to try to

gain control of the situation and avoid mistakes, he makes meticulous preparations for his meetings with caseworkers, including preparing binders with paperwork and taking detailed notes.

Another experience shows how this fear can be related to not just a fear of violating specific rules, but also a more general fear of not living up to expectations.

Interviewer: So, did you talk about you needing more time than six months?

Jesper: Yes. But it was something that ... it was one of the things that I feared saying. When you have made this plan that they have sent you. I was very scared and feared coming and saying, well, I cannot live up to that. I would say that I had real anxiety related to telling my caseworker that.

Interviewer: Why?

Jesper: [sigh] I think it was about not being able to live up to what was agreed. Also because ... it is another person who has interpreted how you would like things to be and what your needs are. And then it can just be difficult to get it just right. And there can ... I don't know. I think it is perhaps just me who is made in the way that I am perhaps a bit afraid to not live up to what has been agreed.

Interviewer: What do you think would happen if you did not live up to what you had agreed?

Jesper: It is the thing about fearing ... do they take my salary, or? Then the whole shebang of, whether they take your income, whether you have rent for next month, do I need to go dumpster diving tonight ... things like that.

Interviewer: But did you then in the end tell her that you did not feel that you could live up to it?

Jesper: Yes, yes. Then, it comes to a point where you have to call, because otherwise you get a letter that you have a meeting coming up or something.

Interviewer: And what was it like then? Did you have a phone call about it or what?

Jesper: For me, it has always been the way that, I have built it up to be the most horrible thing in the world. And then I have just gotten the reaction from my caseworkers that this is just how it is, and then we will take it from there. And it is a bit peculiar, and funny, I think, that I build it up like that. That it is this really dangerous thing that everything doesn't go according to plan, and then ... well.

Interviewer: Why do you think ... where does it come from?

Jesper: I think it is about standing there as a small individual citizen against this giant system, that tells you to be in a certain way, and to behave in the way we expect, or else we take your money and your help and all that. So ... yes. I think

it is about being small and alone in front of it. The great machinery (Jesper, ID12-INT01).

Jesper is a young man in his early 20s who had a moped accident as a teenager. This resulted in a serious shoulder injury which he has received surgery for several times since, and from which he is still recovering. He is suffering from chronic pain, and has a subscription for powerful painkillers.

In the above, he is describing his experience of first entering the benefits system. He provides a detailed description of the kind of anxiety that arises from being dependent on a complex system of rules and regulations, ‘the great machinery’, with the power to take away his income if he does not live up to its expectations about how he should behave. Again, this is not necessarily about specific rules, but about a general sense of having to behave as expected.

The language Jesper uses to describe ‘the system’, as a large machine, is instructive. The impersonal aspect makes it more terrifying, since you cannot appeal to the humanity of a machine. It is perhaps paradoxical, that the impersonal aspect of ‘the system’, the rules and regulations, which in fact exist to ensure the rule of law, equal treatment, and clarity about rights and responsibilities, does not in fact provide assurance, but is rather experienced as a threat: what if I do something wrong?

It is the fear of overstepping the boundaries, without being completely sure what the boundaries are or what the consequences are of overstepping them. This fear and anxiety arise in spite of Jesper having previously had positive experiences with his caseworkers, who are usually understanding and very willing to adapt the plans to his needs.

It is worth noting, that this experience is not typical for all cases. Most interviewees describe something similar to this when talking about their early perceptions of the Jobcentre, but then learn over time that there is no need to be afraid. It is perhaps significant to note that the above excerpt is about Jesper’s first experiences with the Jobcentre, when he still does not know his caseworker that well. He actually had to apply for benefits again at a later stage, and he describes this as still scary, yet not as challenging as the first time.

6.3.4. Financial insecurity

As described in Chapter 5, the current level of the Education Benefit for those categorised as Education Ready is quite low in the Danish context, and is in fact insufficient to cover basic needs. Most of the interviewees describe having difficulties making ends meet, and items such as new clothes and leisurely activities such as going out are considered luxuries that are usually unaffordable.

While some interviewees describe experiencing stress as a result of their limited income, most seem to have adapted to the low incomes, and do not experience it as a great source of stress.

Sia: There were at least some things that I couldn't do. And it was things like ... when you wanted to have a vacation, you had to ask for permission, and you were not allowed to have savings, and you were not allowed to ... if you had to buy something ... this thing about having to apply for a one-off extra benefit or something. And that was just a killer, and it was ... I also come from a place where ... I don't have my parents for example. I don't have any savings lying around somewhere. So if I needed ... if shit hit the fan and I really needed money, then I really just had to get down on my knees and be like: 'please will you help me?' And they rarely want to, I think. And I remember that I needed a computer for studying and it was very expensive, and I didn't have any money, and then I applied for it and I even wrote: 'if you just give me a supplement I would be very happy, and I can pay the rest myself.' And then she wrote back that I should go to the library and use a computer there. Where I was just thinking: 'what the fuck is going on?' Then I had to borrow some money from my friend and buy a computer that way. Which I think ... I had found it hard to save any money from what I was getting, and I was also not allowed to have any savings. So they don't want to give me money or lend me money. So I just felt like that was a major limitation (Sia, ID06-INT01).

In the excerpt above, Sia describes an experience shared by many of the interviewees. Rather than the low income itself, it is the uncertainty which causes stress. This uncertainty is caused mainly by the lack of ability to save, both because of the low income, but also because a maximum of DKK 10,000 in savings is allowed when receiving education benefits. This means that people have no safety net in the form of savings in the case they need to buy more expensive items such as new clothes or a computer for studying.

The lack of income and savings is also a factor constraining people's sense of autonomy, as they do not have the option of e.g. saving for holidays. As already demonstrated by some of the quotes above, the limited financial space is one of the things those who exit benefits (as Sia has done in the final interview, where the excerpt here is from) emphasise as a cause of their greater sense of freedom and wellbeing.

As Sia describes well, this is not just about not having the money, but about the dependence this creates on 'the system' and having to 'get down on my knees' to ask for help, which is experienced as humiliating.

Another source of financial insecurity, and something which limits people's autonomy, is the fact that earned income is deducted from the following month's benefits. Only one person among my interviewees was actually earning income from working, so this is not a common grievance among the group.

However, his example does show how this feature of the system discourages initiative and undermines autonomy.

It is just stressful. It is the uncertainty about what I will have the next month. And if it is a bit tight at the end of the month, then there may be one or two weeks where I just sit and wait until I get paid, because I am stressed out about not having enough money. If there are problems, or if I want to go out with friends, I can't always do that because I don't have enough money ... How the system works with the Jobcentre that punishes me financially if I take too much work, and is not stable or permanent. So it is very frustrating, because when I take initiative, get some extra work, some jobs, and earn more money, well then I am punished for it. I get less stability if I work too much. I find it frustrating, because I have always been taught that you should take initiative and that it is good when you do so, so it is a bit stupid, and I don't think it is clever for the system, to give me poor motivation for taking more work. The only way to get better in this system is to get a permanent job (Jack, ID05-INT02).

In the excerpt above, Jack describes how the fact that he never knows how much money he will have in a given month, because he does not understand how 'the system' calculates deductions, is a constant source of stress for him. He describes in this interview and others how he has a strong need for stability, and he feels that 'the system' denies him this.

In fact, he felt the best period of his life was his time serving in the Danish military, as this provided him with the stability and structure he needed. He describes his experience of the Jobcentre as the opposite of that.

In fact, his stress as a result of this financial instability became so pronounced during the interview period that he started experiencing panic attacks, and had to take sick leave (it is possible to be granted sick leave in the benefits system, which means that you are exempted from all requirements to participate in activities).

This sick leave gave him the stability and mental bandwidth he needed to reflect more about his plans for the future, and he gained more clarity about what he wanted to do, which a short while later helped him find work and exit the benefit system.

Even though his income was lower during his period on sick leave, as he was not working, he had a stable monthly income, which for him was more important. Jack described exiting the benefits system as an experience of great relief and joy, with less economic stress and a much greater sense of security. Other people similarly mentioned the fact that they are now able to save up money as one of the most positive changes of exiting benefits.

6.3.5. Uncertainty

Theoretically, the sense of competence, or agency, is supported through the provision of structure, as well as the provision of challenges that are suitable to people's abilities. In order for people to be able to act to achieve their goals, they need to experience a reasonable degree of predictability about the outcomes of their actions. A key question is therefore whether the system helps or hinders young people in creating structure and achieving certainty. I will get back to this question with regards to some of the specific interventions later. Here, we continue our examination of the overall experience of 'the system'.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you have received the support you have needed?

Niels: To a large extent, yes. I feel that I have received the support and the help that I have needed. It is both about giving me space to get my head in order again, but also at the same time maybe try to push me a bit, challenge me a bit, if there is a risk that I don't move enough. So in that regard, I think it has been very good (Niels, ID16-INT04).

In this excerpt, Niels describes the experience of being given space and/or appropriate challenges when he needed them. This is representative of the general experience among interviewees. In general, the young people support the theoretical expectations of SDT that it is important to be challenged at the right level. Most people describe both having periods where they were not able to do much, and periods where they needed more challenges. Chapter 8 will examine in more detail this interplay between needs and interventions over time.

Some of the things that have been frustrating have been that it hasn't always been so easy to get updates on how things look and sometimes ... for example, in relation to my last extension and such, there was a hell of a lack of clarity and such, and I was the last person to be told whether this was going to happen.

I was very unsure about whether I would be given another extension, so combined with the fact that I received a letter from my caseworker about two or three days before I was told that I had been extended, I got a letter from my caseworker that sounded like, 'okay, by the way we also need to find out what you should do afterwards.' So the communication was confusing and meant that I didn't really have an overview.

I was a bit worried about it, because I didn't have ... it was like, what the fuck do I do then? Because it has been a bit like a stabilising safety-thing for me which has meant that I have better been able to cope with my everyday life. It has meant that something has happened and it has meant that I have started having so much of an overview that I have started planning ahead. If my future suddenly

stops tomorrow or in a week, or something like that ... it is a little difficult to get an overview of your plans more than six months from now, if you don't even know what will happen in a week. It was these kind of things that made me ... when I look back on it I think it was counterintuitive. Because the idea with the system is that either I go out and find some work, or start studying. And when I don't have any overview of what my study plans should be because I don't know what will happen in a week, it is just a bit, I don't think that really works (Niels, ID16-INT04).

Here, Niels speaks to the lack of structure and uncertainty about the future which come from last minute approvals of extensions of courses. This is a recurrent issue for those of the young people who were following courses for longer periods. Attending these courses came to play an important role in their lives, and is generally described as having had an enormous influence on their ability to cope with their mental health issues, as a way to provide structure to their lives, and to maintain a social life.

It was therefore associated with a great deal of anxiety when they did not know whether they would receive approval of another three month stay at a course provider, since this has a great influence on what their lives will be like only a few weeks later.

In general, despite the emphasis on long-term planning embodied for example in the 'My Plan' tool, the young people did not experience the Jobcentre as being very good at providing structure through long-term planning.

As described by Niels, last-minute decisions by caseworkers are experienced as being at odds with the efforts to put together a long-term plan for getting back to work or education. Similarly, several interviewees experienced long series of job placements, where it was not always clear how they contributed to moving people closer to work or education.

As we will get back to in the next chapter, the connection with caseworkers is also important for structure. Caseworkers are needed to make decisions about what is going to happen, particularly about whether people will get an extension for a course.

There is therefore a connection between the need for competence, the need for structure, and the need for certainty and stability, understood as knowledge about what will happen in the near future, which is important both for the young people's wellbeing (their need for competence) and their ability to plan for the future. Uncertainty about the future is detrimental to wellbeing. Unfortunately, the way 'the system' works around short-term interventions, which are often extended close to the date they expire, is not always conducive to creating a feeling of security.

6.4. Discussion: The Conditionality Mindset

To sum up the above analysis, I have shown how it is meaningful and important to distinguish between people's experiences of 'the system' of active labour market policies, versus the specific experiences of frontline worker encounters and interventions, a distinction which is also supported by other studies (Nielsen et al., 2022).

The young people in my case study perceive 'the system' as a complex of rules and regulations, which is experienced as impersonal, rigid, and demanding. 'The system' is generally described in a negative way, even in those cases where people have only positive experiences of the specific meetings with caseworkers and the activities they have participated in.

More specifically, I identified five aspects of the young people's experience of the system: a) restricted agency; b) feeling monitored; c) fear of making mistakes; d) financial insecurity; and e) uncertainty. Together, these five aspects create a particular experience of life on benefits, similar to what Wright & Patrick (2019) term 'shared typical experiences'.

We started this chapter with Niels' description of the system as a sword of Damocles. In this sense, being on benefits, and the rules and regulations that one has to comply with, is a kind of constant background stressor, which takes up mental bandwidth and reduces people's sense of autonomy and competence.

A concept from the literature on behavioural economics describes a similar phenomenon: the so-called 'scarcity mindset'. The 'scarcity mindset' refers to the fact that the experience of scarcity (having less than you feel you need) of any kind reduces mental bandwidth and therefore makes people less insightful, less forward-thinking, and less in control of their lives (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). A key point in Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) is that scarcity 'captures the mind'. If you are hungry you think about food, if you are sleep-deprived you think about sleep.

So, what does this mean for the young unemployed? Well, first of all they do of course often experience scarcity of income, meaning that they are focused on making ends meet. However, they are also focused on compliance with the expectations of 'the system', of not overstepping the boundaries they are given. Similarly to the case of scarcity of income, this has implications for their mental bandwidth, and for their wellbeing.

As we have seen in this chapter, this conditionality mindset is detrimental to people's feelings of autonomy and competence: it is detrimental to their sense of autonomy because the preoccupation with complying with expectations and being 'good citizens', a result of the general feeling of being monitored and with the threat of sanctions always present in the background,

shapes people's behaviour. This can be seen, within the framework of SDT, as a type of external motivation, which means that people's actions are less autonomously motivated.

It is also detrimental to people's sense of competence, as discussed in relation to their sense of *agency*. As benefit recipients, the young people often do not feel competent to change their situation and generally perceive themselves to be in a passive position vis-à-vis 'the system', understood as the complex of rules and regulations. The results of this are apparent from people's testimonies about the difference between life on and off benefits. The experience of exiting benefits is characterised by feelings of increased autonomy and competence, in the sense of being able to take actions that lead to a life better aligned with their own preferences.

Based on these considerations, I propose the concept of a 'Conditionality Mindset' to describe the experiences of people depending on a benefits system that requires compliance with certain behavioural conditions in order to receive income transfers. The concept brings together existing and new ideas about how welfare conditionalities affect people's wellbeing and motivation, as summarised in Table 11.

Table 11: Aspects of the Conditionality Mindset, the characteristics of the system which produces them, and the outcomes in terms of basic psychological needs and wellbeing

Aspects of the Conditionality Mindset	Characteristics of the benefits system	Implications for basic psychological needs and wellbeing
Restricted agency	Lack of transparency about rights and responsibilities Passive role of citizens Limited information	Limited sense of competence
Being monitored	Documentation requirements Requirement to comply with demands	Sense of vulnerability Sense of being controlled/limited sense of autonomy Sense of mistrust
The fear of making mistakes	Complexity of rules Unclear expectations Threat of sanctions	Anxiety Limited sense of autonomy
The experience of financial insecurity	Low benefit levels Limits on savings Deductions of earned income	Limited sense of competence Limited sense of autonomy
The experience of uncertainty	Short-term interventions Last-minute approvals of extensions Lack of long-term planning	Limited sense of competence

As shown in Table 11, the Conditionality Mindset is characterised by five distinct experiences, which are all likely to be experienced to various degrees by different people under different types of welfare conditionality regimes. These experiences are:

- a. The experience of restricted agency
- b. The experience of being monitored
- c. The fear of making mistakes
- d. The experience of financial insecurity
- e. The experience of uncertainty

I term these aspects ‘experiences’, as they represent an attempt at organising the different ways that interviewees describe their thoughts and feelings about receiving benefits. These experiences are then associated with certain characteristics of the welfare conditionality benefits system (described in the middle column of Table 11).

The connections between the left and middle columns are based on the experiences of interviewees themselves, as demonstrated throughout the analysis above. For example, an interviewee may describe the process of having to provide bank statements as part of the application process, and at the same time describe how they experienced this process, including their thoughts and emotions about the event. The linkages between characteristics of the system and the young people’s experiences are therefore constructed in the interview situation in a cooperation between the interviewee and me as a researcher, with my role being to encourage interviewees to reflect on their experiences in as open a manner as possible. In addition, subsequently my analytical contribution is to identify categories of experiences and patterns of regularity in the data, noting which experiences are most often linked to which characteristics of ‘the system’.

In contrast, the column to the right contains theoretical concepts associating the different aspects of the Conditionality Mindset with basic psychological needs and wellbeing. To make these connections between certain experiences and wellbeing, I build on the theoretical framework of self-determination theory, to link experiences with the concepts of competence and autonomy. Contrary to the linkages between the first two columns, I therefore play a larger role in the analysis here, utilising experience-distant concepts to combine the statements of interviewees with the theoretical framework of SDT and previous empirical research on autonomy, competence, and wellbeing.

To summarise the information in the table from top to bottom:

a. *Restricted agency* is associated with the passive role that citizens are placed in vis-à-vis ‘the system’. Citizens are not expected to take the lead in

identifying appropriate activities to participate in. They also have limited ability to do so, since they lack information about how the system works, including the different types of categories one may belong to, their specific rights and responsibilities, and which activities are possible. The experience of restricted agency is associated with a limited sense of competence to effectively change one's situation.

b. Being monitored is associated with documentation requirements linked to rules about the income and wealth allowances for recipients of social assistance in Denmark. The experience is associated with feelings of being controlled, and with a sense of not being trusted, which is detrimental to the need for autonomy and for autonomous forms of motivation. Documentation requirements leads to a feeling of 'making yourself vulnerable by exposing yourself'.

c. Fear of making mistakes is associated with the combination of a lack of transparency about rights and responsibilities and the threat of being sanctioned if one does not comply with the requirements. The fear of making mistakes is a cause of anxiety, related to the fear of being sanctioned and losing income.

d. Financial insecurity is associated with the combination of low benefit levels, limits on allowed savings, and deductions of earned income. Financial stress leads to thwarting of autonomy.

e. Uncertainty is associated with the use of short-term interventions, last-minute approvals of extensions, and limited long-term planning. Uncertainty leads to a limited sense of competence, because it makes it difficult to predict the expected outcomes of one's actions.

Of these five experiences, the restriction on agency is perhaps the one that has been discussed most in the existing literature (Wright, 2012). Previous studies have noted how conditionalities restrict the agency of benefit recipients, describing 'restrictive agency' (Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021) and 'collapses of agency' (Wright, 2016). Several studies have examined agency from the points of view of different citizen strategies, or types of responses to conditionalities, often emphasising the conflict between citizens and 'the system' (Wright et al., 2020).

My contribution here is to link specific characteristics of people's experiences of 'the system' – the fundamentally passive role that people are cast in, in part because of lack of information and transparency – with the experience of restricted agency. In addition, a main theoretical contribution of employing the SDT framework is to explain why agency is important for wellbeing.

The connections between conditionalities, agency, and wellbeing are often nuanced. For example, while agency (competence) is a basic psychological

need, this need can be more acutely felt at different times, depending on people's circumstances. Similarly, restrictions on agency, although this may seem paradoxical, do not necessarily always involve a violation of people's need for autonomy.

With the focus on the importance of social roles, norms, and expectations for agency, my analysis follows a tradition of seeing agency as embedded in social contexts (Duncan and Edwards, 1997 in Wright, 2012). It is the young people's acute sensitivity to the social expectations placed upon them, and the role they are cast in as unemployed citizens, that places the most restrictions on their agency, and in this way their agency is constrained by the norms and power relations at play in the specific situation.

As suggested by Wright (2012) the concept of 'intersubjectivity' is useful as a way to describe this view of agency as profoundly enmeshed with shared expectations: "At front-line service level, users and advisers jointly create a dynamic mix in which motivations and behaviours are intertwined, interdependent and intersubjective" (Wright, 2012, p. 323). What the present analysis highlights, then, is how welfare conditionalities in the Danish context shape these shared expectations in ways that restrict the agency of benefit recipients.

Importantly, it is the subjective experiences of the study participants which define the limits of their agency. Objectively speaking, the space for agency is in fact probably much larger than the subjective room for agency that the young people experience. 'The system's' features of surveillance and having to be available makes the subjective room for agency smaller, and exiting benefits is felt as an expansion of the room for agency (described as an experience of 'freedom'), even if the actual, objective, room for agency may well be smaller, because people no longer have access to the services of the Jobcentre. Yet interviewees felt better able to make their own decisions, without having to justify them towards the Jobcentre.

The findings here can be seen as a contribution to the effort to contrast the lived experiences of benefit recipients with a rational choice model of behaviour and instead develop an understanding of benefit recipients' agency as "connected to others and influenced by shared expectations and the needs of significant others" (Wright, 2016, p. 249). I will turn again to examining this intersubjective view of agency in Chapter 7, which provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the study participants and frontline workers.

It is rare for studies in the social policy literature to attempt to conceptualise the experience of living on benefits in a systematic way. One exception is Wright & Patrick (2019), who identify a set of 'shared typical' motives and experiences of benefit recipients, based on two qualitative longitudinal studies

carried out in the UK between 2011 and 2017. Contrary to most other qualitative studies of ‘lived experience’, the authors propose ‘an underlying essence of broadly-shared lived experience’ similar to what I have here called a ‘Conditionality Mindset’. It is therefore worth dwelling a little more on this particular conceptual contribution, noting similarities and differences and potential ways forward for this kind of conceptual work.

The first ‘shared typical’ experience Wright & Patrick (2019) identify in the UK context is ‘orientations towards employment’. This headline captures the experience of experiencing intrinsic motivation to find work, yet being met by a system that assumes a lack of motivation to find work, and as a consequence demands intensive job search.

Compared to the experiences of young unemployed people in Denmark, there is no doubt that interviewees expressed motivation to find work or education, although many were not able to do so when first entering the benefits system, as a result of mental health issues. However, contrary to the experiences commonly described of conditionalities in the UK, my study participants did not express a feeling of having their motivations doubted as a result of the conditionalities. In fact, this group of young people were not subjected to strict job search requirements and generally felt that the demands put on them were relevant and reasonable. As described above, the mistrust they did feel was more related to the feeling of being monitored, for example by having to provide bank statements and having attendance registered at activities.

Next, Wright & Patrick (2019) highlight ‘prevailing poverty’ as a result of both sanctions and low benefit levels, and how this ‘sabotages the physical and psychological foundations’ of benefit recipients.

Again, the experience of destitution is not common among my interviewees in the Danish context. Even though they are on the lowest benefits, and have difficulties making ends meet, most are somehow able to get used to the situation.⁴ Rather, what people find stressful is the lack of ability to save and the resulting lack of economic security.

Regarding sanctions, these also play a minor role for most people in the Danish context, as they are infrequent and usually involve one-off deductions

⁴ Even the lowest Danish benefit levels are substantially higher than the UK benefit levels. In 2023, the Danish Education Benefit was equivalent to GBP 779/month for those classified as ‘Education Ready’, and substantially higher for those classified as ‘Activity Ready’. In comparison, the UK Universal Credit was GBP 265/month for those under 25 and GBP 335 for those above 25. Even taking into account the fact that the Danish benefits are taxable and Universal Credit is non-taxable, after-tax income is likely to be substantially higher in Denmark.

of minor amounts. However, what is more consequential is the threat of sanctions, as described under ‘fear of making mistakes’. The differences between the typical experiences identified seem therefore to result from the different ways that conditionalities are implemented in Denmark and the UK.

Third, Wright & Patrick (2019) identify common experiences related to ‘the way conditionality governs the encounter’ between caseworkers and citizens. Here they highlight the fear of being sanctioned, in a similar way as what I term the ‘fear of making mistakes’, and show how this fear negatively affects relations with frontline workers. While I find that the fear of sanctions does have negative consequences for people’s behaviour in encounters with frontline workers, I also find that, contrary to what one might expect, it does not prevent the development of positive caseworker citizen relations (as discussed in-depth in Chapter 7).

Interestingly, the psychological mechanisms of people facing coercion in the UK system speak very much to the SDT framework and the connection between extrinsic factors, autonomy loss, and different types of motivation. What makes the difference between the UK and Danish contexts is not the theoretical mechanisms, but the way conditionalities are implemented, including the way caseworkers communicate with citizens about conditionalities, which can either support or undermine people’s sense of autonomy and agency (Wright & Patrick, 2019, p. 606).

Finally, Wright & Patrick (2019) highlight the ‘elusiveness of the right support’ as an important part of people’s experiences of conditionalities in the UK context. They find that the general experience, with few exceptions, is one of not being offered relevant support, and that this can be demoralising for benefit recipients. This experience is arguably not directly linked to the conditionalities of benefits as such, but rather to the kind of support which is (not) made available as part of active labour market policies in the UK. I examine the experience of my study participants concerning this aspect in greater depth in Chapter 8.

Overall, Wright & Patrick (2019) confirm the relevance of developing a model for describing benefit recipients’ experiences of welfare conditionalities in a more systematic and general manner. The differences between the two frameworks also show some of the challenges of arriving at concepts that describe experiences in very different contexts. Yet, it does seem that there are many ‘shared and typical’ experiences across contexts, and that some experiences are simply more important in some contexts and less important in others. As such, the different emphasis in the model presented by Wright & Patrick and the one I have presented here represents differences in people’s experiences of different types of conditionality regimes, not theoretical differences.

A fruitful way forward might therefore be for more conceptual work to draw on qualitative data from different contexts. This would also serve to identify which experiences are inherent to life under welfare conditionalities, and which experiences are contingent on particular ways of implementing these conditionalities.

As it is now, there seems to be a tendency to base general assessments of people's experience of welfare conditionalities on data from the UK, which represent a particular way of implementing conditionalities. These findings have already been nuanced by studies from the Nordic countries which show how different approaches to implementation result in very different experiences (Caswell & Larsen, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2022).

Bringing together data from different contexts would enable us to better identify the general mechanisms that link conditionalities at policy level with implementation at the frontline and citizen experiences, moving beyond case studies of particular contexts.

Furthermore, what I have proposed here is that a focus on wellbeing as the central outcome of interest may serve as a common yardstick for grounding future conceptual work on the lived experience of welfare conditionalities. A great strength of the self-determination theory framework is the normative basis of the framework in the three basic psychological needs. In particular, the focus on autonomy and competence (agency) as basic human needs seems highly relevant for understanding people's experiences of welfare conditionalities. This may be combined with the ongoing conceptual work of Wright and others around the concept of agency as it relates to people's experiences of welfare conditionalities.

6.5. Conclusions

This chapter presented an analysis of young unemployed people's experiences of life on benefits in the Danish active labour market system. The analysis clearly showed that young unemployed people distinguish between the experience of the overall 'system', and the experience of specific encounters with caseworkers or participation in activities. It is therefore important to include an analysis of how they experience 'the system' in order to get a comprehensive picture of how active labour market policies affect their wellbeing.

The analysis showed how the young people already have very negative views of the system prior to applying for benefits. Even though these negative expectations were not confirmed by the actual meetings with frontline workers in the Jobcentre, which were generally positive, the negative views of 'the system' persisted during people's time on benefits, and remained afterwards even for those who exited the benefits system.

A major finding in this chapter is therefore that experiences of ‘the system’, or life on benefits more generally, is not just the sum of the experience of specific events, encounters, or activities, but that the experience of the system is ‘decoupled’ from the experience of specific events.

Another important finding to highlight is that the experience of ‘the system’ is associated with rules and demands and characterised as rigid and inflexible. The difference between frontline workers and ‘the system’ is often described in terms of a dichotomy between human characteristics and characteristics of a machine.

Finally, when analysing interviewee descriptions of the experience of the system, five main experiences can be identified: feelings of restricted agency, the sense of being monitored, the fear of making mistakes, the experience of financial insecurity, and the sense of uncertainty about the future. Together these five experiences result in what can be described as a ‘Conditionality Mindset’. This Conditionality Mindset has important implications for the well-being of young people, as it undermines the basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence.

Chapter 7:

Adapting to expectations: Social norms and basic psychological needs in citizen-frontline worker interactions

Having examined how young people experience the overall context of the active labour market system, I now move on to consider their more specific experiences. These include experiences of implementation processes, which primarily involve meetings with frontline workers, as well as their experiences of these activities (e.g. job placements and various courses). In this chapter, I provide an analysis of how the research participants experience their encounters with caseworkers and other frontline workers, and the implications of these experiences for their overall wellbeing.

7.1. Introduction

Studies of the effects of active labour market policies usually focus on specific interventions, such as job search courses or job placements. At any given time, hundreds of different active labour market projects are being trialled in Danish municipalities – most of them focusing on piloting particular interventions, mainly in the form of various courses.

However, from my interviews, it is clear that the relationship between citizens and caseworkers is absolutely central to the effectiveness and relevance of these interventions. In order for interventions to be effective, they have to fit each individual person's specific needs at a specific time. The selection of the right activities depends on a good relationship between the caseworker and the citizen. The young people's experiences of these meetings are therefore crucial for whether ALMPs support or undermine citizens' wellbeing – and in turn, for whether they are effective at helping people enter work or education.

This is particularly the case for the group of young unemployed people with mental health issues. For this group, conversations with caseworkers are not just a matter of being supported to find work, but involve discussions of deeply personal and sensitive issues of identity and mental health. Often the young people find themselves in the most difficult time of their lives when they enter the benefits system, and in order to receive the right kind of support, they need to be able to open up about how they are really feeling. Strong, trusting, and cooperative relationships with caseworkers are therefore essential for this group in particular.

The chapter is structured in the following way: first, I explain why the relationship with the caseworker is of central importance for young unemployed people. Second, I examine what characterises different types of caseworker encounters. Third, I analyse the young people's experiences of the relationship with caseworkers and identify the most important social norms that govern the relationship, and fourth, I discuss the implications of these different experiences for the young people's wellbeing.

7.2. On the importance of the relationship with caseworkers

A key point from my interviews is that it is very important for the young people to feel that they have a good relationship with their caseworker. In this first section, I therefore present data supporting this argument.

Jesper: I called her and told her that I would like to have a meeting with her, because I hadn't seen her yet, and it was during COVID and [I wanted to] have an extraordinary meeting where I could meet her. It is also about having to present one's whole life to someone you haven't really seen, and... you kind of believe that it is just a robot sitting there inside the computer and handling everything because you don't know that it is flesh and blood you are really talking to.

Interviewer: So, would you say that it gives you something else to have a physical meeting than a phone meeting?

Jesper: A lot. A lot, because I use body language a lot, I decode that a lot. So things like getting a little smile back, that reassures me quickly whether I am saying the right things in terms of fulfilling what my caseworker would like to hear. On the contrary, I can't know that in a phone call or an email correspondence or a text message, you know. So I like the physical meeting (Jesper, ID12-INT01).

In the excerpt above, Jesper explains how it is important for him to feel that he knows his caseworker. This is a sentiment expressed by most of the young people. The data reveals many accounts like Jesper's, where the young people themselves take the initiative to contact caseworkers when they feel the need to get an update or meet a new caseworker.

For Jesper, the physical meeting is important. Others expressed that they actually preferred the online or phone meetings introduced during COVID-19, as they felt more comfortable expressing their opinions freely while sitting in their own homes than when having to participate in physical meetings at the Jobcentre. Whether they had a preference for physical or remote meetings, all expressed a desire to talk to their caseworker, to get the feeling that they knew them.

In the above quote, Jesper describes his wish to feel that he is talking to a human of ‘flesh and blood’ and not a ‘robot sitting there inside the computer’, something which speaks to the basic need to connect with another human being. In addition, he describes that it is important to him to feel that he knows the person to whom he has to present ‘his whole life’.

This is a common experience that is perhaps particularly salient for the group of young people who struggle with mental health issues (most of the interviewees). Their issues of unemployment and not having completed education are deeply intertwined with issues of identity and mental health, which are highly sensitive and personal. Opening up about these issues requires a level of trust in the person you are talking to, which partly explains their strong interest in trying to develop a good relationship with their caseworker.

In the second part of the excerpt, Jesper talks about the importance of meeting with caseworkers in order to get a sense of what kind of expectations they hold, and of whether he is complying with these expectations. A general finding from the interviews is that the young people are very concerned about complying with caseworkers’ expectations. This is related to the fact that, as noted above, it is often not very clear to the young people what demands they have to comply with. They are therefore looking to caseworkers to try to decipher how they are expected to behave. It is also related to the fact that caseworkers have the power to make decisions which can have important ramifications for the young people. It is therefore essential for the young people to feel that caseworkers recognise their needs and take their interests into account during their decision-making process.

The caseworker I have at the moment I have more negative feelings about. The first time I spoke with her on the phone was a couple of months ago, right. I have had her since November. Besides that I haven’t had any contact, outside of what she has sent in the electronic mailbox. Nothing. No emails, no meetings, nothing. And it is understandable in the way that we... I am at [course] and I am sort of parked there now. But at the same time it is also a bit nerve-wracking, because it is her that has my [course]-future in her hands, right? (Michael, ID08-INT01).

In this excerpt, Michael describes a similar sentiment to Jesper: that it is important to feel a connection with the caseworker, because of the decision-making power they hold. In Michael’s case, it is a source of anxiety for him, ‘a bit nerve-wracking’, that he hasn’t had any contact with his new caseworker, because it is the caseworker who decides whether Michael will be allowed to continue the course he is currently attending. Since the course is a very important part of Michael’s life, both because it aids his recovery from depression and because it is a big part of his social life, he has a need to know whether he will be allowed to continue attending.

The fact that the caseworker has not been in touch with Michael is in itself a source of negative emotions towards the caseworker. By the time of our next interview, Michael had had a meeting with the caseworker which relieved him from this feeling of anxiety, as he was reassured that his future at the course was secure, and was able to confirm that he had not been forgotten, but that the caseworker had simply not felt the need for frequent meetings while Michael was attending the course.

A trusting relationship is also important for the young people to feel that they can open up to caseworkers about their needs, and therefore also for receiving the right intervention.

I don't think I gave her very much to work with. And I also don't think I was prepared to expose myself like that. I felt that it was very transgressive for me, who has never talked about these things, to sit with some lady who I don't know what kind of education she has, and who by the way didn't seem especially interested in my mental health. There was not an invitation to... well, I don't think she knew how to handle my attitude. And I had no clue what to say to her, I had no clue what she wanted to hear. And I didn't particularly feel like sharing with her. That's also why I think it was good that I had someone with me the next time, who could talk about my side of things. Because I was clueless and very uninterested in sitting there and sharing this with strangers (Sia, ID09-INT01).

In this excerpt, Sia describes her first meeting with her caseworker. It is clear from her description that she did not trust the caseworker enough to open up about her issues. She describes an experience of a meeting that did not go well: from her side, she was not prepared to open up about her mental health issues, and from the caseworker's side, Sia did not perceive an interest in hearing about these issues. A trusting relationship was therefore not established. The result was that she did not initially get the help she needed – this only happened later, when she was able to bring someone to a meeting with the caseworker to support her.

There are many aspects of the meeting to consider here: first, Sia's experience of her own position. She describes herself as not very attuned to the expectations of the meeting, and as not being prepared to open up about personal issues. At this point, right at the start of her period on benefits, she has yet to go through a process of reflection and awareness of herself and her illness, and it is therefore unfamiliar and unpleasant for her to talk about her mental health issues.

Second, the role of the caseworker: Sia experiences her as a stranger, 'some lady', with whom she have no relation. Her qualifications, intentions, and expectations are unknown to Sia, who therefore is 'clueless' about what she should reveal about herself. Finally, the situation itself is also unfamiliar to

Sia: she is not sure what the purpose of the meeting is, nor of what role she is expected to play in this situation.

Together, these factors make for an, at best, unproductive encounter. At worst – and there are several cases of this in my data – this kind of encounter results in mentally ill persons being assigned to activities that they are not fit for.

Interviewer: Was that something that you took initiative to say, that you didn't feel it was the right thing with the job placement?

Michael: Well, this thing about discussing the deeper things, and how I felt, I think that has come from her initiative. Because it is like ... there has to be some kind of trust, and I had a lot of mistrust in the system at that time. So I would think that has come from her, and then as I have started to trust her, I have felt that I could bring it up. That I thought it was difficult to imagine having to do a job placement (Michael, IDo8-INTo1).

In this excerpt, Michael articulates clearly how trust is something that is built gradually – and as we also saw in the previous chapter, most of the young people started from a position of mistrust. It is also clear how trust is important for opening up about sensitive issues, such as for example mental health issues, which is in turn essential for the young people to receive the right kinds of interventions.

On the contrary, a lack of trust, and consequently a lack of openness about their real issues, is likely to lead to people being pressured into participating in activities that they are not able to handle, and which have detrimental effects on their wellbeing and mental health. Trust has a lot to do with feeling that the other person has your interests at heart. This definition is embodied in some of the young person's descriptions of their relationship with caseworkers.

Jesper: It also depends on what kind of relationship you have with your caseworker. I have always had a hard time with authorities and so on, so that has been a bit of a challenge for me.

Interviewer: How so?

Jesper: For example, it has been very difficult for me to call them and tell them that I haven't lived up to some of the things in my plan, and then I just buried myself in worries about the consequences instead of just figuring it out. Because you always have this in the back of your head: 'do I have an income on the first ... because I didn't show up this one day' and so on.

Interviewer: If you try to compare the relation you have with the teachers at [course] with the relation you have with caseworkers, what is the difference then?

Jesper: Oh ... I think they are less prejudiced at [course] and they have a broader understanding of people, and how it is to be a human in the modern world. Because I also think that the caseworkers, the only image they have of their citizens is from these few meetings once in a while, and then you get a quick first-hand impression, but other than that it is just the criteria and descriptions in one's plan they have to go by. And they can be very rigid if you don't feel that you can open up in the few meetings you have. So I think that would be a place you could do an intervention.

Interviewer: So, it is really a question about needing more contact in order to open up. Is that what you mean?

Jesper: Yes, exactly. It is a bit like a date which is too fast. You are forced into a relationship that you don't really want (Jesper, ID12-INT02).

In the above excerpt, Jesper describes how it is important for him to establish a sense of trust in the caseworker, which comes from feeling that they know him. This sense of trust must be present if he is to open up about his needs.

He contrasts the caseworkers with teachers at the course he has been attending and describes how establishing a trusting relationship with caseworkers is more difficult, partly because he only has infrequent, short, meetings with them, and partly because they have a more narrow focus than the teachers.

An important issue mentioned by many of the young people is that of changes in caseworkers. Developing a relationship is made especially difficult when the young people have to relate to many different people, and there are frequent caseworker changes. As described in Chapter 5, in the case municipality, functions between frontline workers are quite specialised and involve staff carrying out the initial screening, staff at the Benefits Office, Education Consultants, Company Consultants and staff at course providers.

In addition, the Jobcentre frontline workers often change, either because people are assigned to different staff once they are assigned to courses or job placements, or because of staff changes. The procedures involved in caseworker changes does not seem to properly recognise the importance of the relationship for the young people, who often experience caseworker changes as abrupt and lacking in information. For example, they may be missing a proper goodbye from the outgoing caseworker and a personal introduction from the new caseworker, instead suddenly receiving a letter signed by a new person. Sometimes they are even unsure about who their caseworker is. This is a cause of anxiety and uncertainty.

Signe: You feel a bit like a child. That someone is thinking: 'we will take decisions for them, they don't need to know. It is not important and there just needs to be someone who can answer their questions, that will have to do'.

Interviewer: So it seems a bit impersonal in a way then?

Signe: Yes, definitely. Very much so. It is again this thing where you feel like just a number in the row, right? That you are not really taken seriously and that you just have to do as you are told in a way. And this thing that, 'we know what is best', and 'we will figure it out and then they will have to comply'. That can be a little difficult to accept, I must say (Signe, ID03-INT02).

In the above excerpt, Signe expresses her frustration that there is not a proper process in place for changes in caseworkers. She would like to be told that there will be a change, and have a chance to say goodbye to the previous caseworker and an introduction to the new one. The lack of these experiences makes her feel that the relationship is not taken seriously, and it makes her feel devalued.

To summarise, feeling a sense of connection with caseworkers has intrinsic value for the young people. A positive relationship contributes to fulfilment of the basic psychological need for relatedness, including feelings of being understood and meeting another person who listens and cares about one's needs.

In addition, there are also more instrumental reasons for maintaining a good relationship with one's caseworker: first, the young people have to share very sensitive and personal information with caseworkers; second, caseworkers have the power to make decisions of great importance to the young people; and third, a close relationship with caseworkers is a source of information for the young people about what is expected of them.

7.3. Autonomy and relatedness in caseworker encounters

Caseworkers in Danish Jobcentres have dual roles: they both need to support people to enter education or employment, and to ensure that people fulfil their obligation to be available to the labour market. This reflects the dual objectives of Danish active labour market policies: to improve people's wellbeing, but also to increase the supply of labour. From the young people's experiences, it is clear that there are big differences between which role the individual caseworker emphasises, and which objective takes precedence. This results in both positive and negative experiences of the encounter with caseworkers. The positive evaluations are in the majority, but there were also many negative experiences relayed in the interviews.⁵

⁵ I have coded 85 excerpts in 39 interviews as positive evaluations of caseworkers, and 50 excerpts in 17 interviews as negative evaluations. However, what is interesting here is of course not only the balance between the two, but to examine what characterises the positive and negative experiences respectively.

Often the same person will have had both positive and negative caseworker experiences, and the young people describe, often explicitly, how there is a lot of variation in the approaches that different caseworkers adopt. In this section, I provide an analysis of the young people's experiences of caseworker encounters. I find that these experiences can be characterised as encounters with either caring caseworkers, indifferent caseworkers or controlling caseworkers.

7.3.1. The caring caseworker

Sometimes you can just feel on people that this person cares about how I fare, and cares about me. And it was just very quickly, right there, that I got that sense (Michael, ID08-INT01).

The sense that another person cares about our wellbeing plays a central role in our relationships with others. As described above, the young people appreciate feeling that caseworkers remember them and care about them. The positive relationships are therefore also characterised by relatively frequent contact with caseworkers. People appreciate when caseworkers for example call to check in, 'taking initiative to ask how things are going with me', which means that 'you feel that someone has thought about you' (ID01-INT01).

Caseworkers who are perceived as caring are perceived to take an interest in the young people as human beings, and not to be only focused on whether they comply with conditionalities. These caseworkers focus on the relationship, not just on 'box-checking', i.e. getting through their tasks, such as making sure the young people participate in activation.

and then when we have been talking anyway, she has just interjected 'So how are you?' And I think that has been very much what has given me the feeling that she cares about how I have been (Anne, ID10-INT04).

I feel that she doesn't have an intention to push me into something that I am not ready for. That she knows that, if she pushes me into something, some education, or something, where I might not be ready, then I may be there again in a year anyway. So there is ... I just really feel that you are respected in a way. And that they consider you individually, and don't just put me in some box... I felt that she was good at, like, seeing who I was, where I was right now in my life. And then presented to me the things that would make sense (Astrid, ID06-INT01).

More than anything else, these caseworkers show that they take an interest in the wellbeing of the young persons, not just in whether they are making progress towards education or work. As Anne describes in the excerpt above, something as simple as asking how she has been doing can show that a caseworker cares about her.

The feeling that caseworkers care is closely related to the sense that they listen to what the young people are saying. This is expressed in both verbal communication and body language. Being present, aware, and listening is for example shown by looking the young people in the eye and facing them. As Ida describes, she felt that her caseworker cared about her because: “she looked me in the eye, didn’t just sit there at her computer and type” (ID07-INT01). The positive experiences are characterised by a sense that caseworkers practice active listening and hear not just the words that the young people are saying, but are also able to understand what they really mean.

[Company Consultant] was great, because she said to me ‘I can see that you have first and second priorities’ and then I explained to her that I had put a second priority but I didn’t want that, and she listened to what I said and she said, ‘you know what, that’s fine, I have had a lot of people in job placement in [shop]. We will find a place for you’.

You can feel that [Company Consultant] is dedicated to her work, and is committed to making something happen. Not just like, ‘you just have to move on, if we can find a job for you in [supermarket chain] well that’s what we will do, and if it is 50 kilometres away you will just have to take it, because I tell you to’. You know, she is not like that (Signe, ID03-INT01).

She understood what I was saying. It was clear that she was not just going through a procedure. Despite having been there for 20 years, she still looks at the individual and thinks ‘who is this? What does he want?’ She hasn’t put words in my mouth, or in any way tried to lead me down a certain path (Bo, ID17-INT01).

I have pretty much been allowed to do what I want. I have just written to my caseworker, ‘I would like these courses, I would like this, I would like that’, then she has just said, ‘okay, let’s do it’. She has a bit more trust in me, I think. If I make a suggestion, it isn’t so far from ‘how come you would like that’ to ‘okay you can have it’. And I think, especially the one before, she was very sceptical about, like why. As if she was trying to figure out what my hidden agenda was. I found that super unpleasant. You can’t work with that. I felt I had to defend myself a lot (Sia, ID09-INT03).

As described in different ways in the excerpts above by Signe, Bo, and Sia, the caseworkers who are perceived as caring also show support of the young people’s own priorities. Signe contrasts the experience of her Education Consultant, who she experienced as very prone to making specific suggestions and very inflexible, with that of her Company Consultant. She describes how the Company Consultant supported her own wishes for a job placement, not forcing her to do anything she did not want to do. Bo links his perception of his

caseworker being caring to their willingness to listen to him and take an interest in who he is and what he wants.

Similarly, Sia contrasts two different caseworkers, and describes the positive experience as one of being supported to pursue her own priorities, without being met with scepticism and mistrust. In this way, the positive experience is also one of feeling that the caseworker shows trust in the young person's ability to know what they need themselves, and also trusts them not to try to shirk their responsibilities or avoid living up to their part of the bargain, but actually to do their best to make progress towards exiting benefits.

7.3.2. The indifferent caseworker

Another type of caseworker experience may be characterised as the 'indifferent' caseworker. This is the experience of encounters with caseworkers who are not perceived as taking an interest in the wellbeing of the young people, and are not perceived to be listening or taking their needs seriously.

Again, the fact that you feel like a number. I don't think I have ever really had that experience of thinking, 'I was well cared for here'... because they have just been very technical, very superficial and such, right? It has been very superficial conversations I think. And they are also somewhat withdrawn, and I think you have to be. You can't go too much into it and be too sensitive, because then you take your job with you home, and it becomes difficult. I can relate to that. But I think it becomes very technical, very formal (Signe, UB03-INT01).

Here, Signe describes her experience of a lack of a personal relation with caseworkers, that she 'feels like a number' and that the relationship is very 'superficial', 'technical', and 'formal'. She would have liked a more personal connection, a greater feeling of relatedness with her caseworkers. This also speaks to the need for caseworkers to build a sense of trust.

Caseworkers are sometimes perceived to signal in meetings that they are not really present, or not really listening. This is for example characterised by body language without eye-contact, focused on taking notes, rather than focusing on the person.

Sia: I don't think she ... well, she hears what I am saying, but she is not really present, I feel. I can't feel a contact with her, and she doesn't like eye contact, and she is very like ... she doesn't hear *how* I say things, she just hears what I say and then she writes it down. She is very practical. So if I say this, then that's what we will do, and then there is no empathy, I can't feel her empathy at all. Very practically oriented and very ... data focused, I think.

Interviewer: Is that different than what you have experienced with other caseworkers before?

Sia: Yes, I think so. Well, I have had one or two who were fairly ... where I was thinking, 'okay, that's a bit ...' But then I haven't had them for so long.

Interviewer: How do you mean?

Sia: Well, fairly ... to put it bluntly, not caring how I was doing, as long as I am doing what I am told. Very machine, factory-like, conveyer-belt-like, move-on-next-like. Not really invested in me personally. But that has been very short periods of time I have had those. And now I am activity ready, so I know that I will have this one for a long time, so that's why I am considering saying maybe we need to try another, because the chemistry is simply not there. We are very different people.

Interviewer: What was better with the one you had before?

Sia: Well she, I don't know, there was just a better contact. It was like ... she could remember things we had talked about. She could refer to something that I had found a little difficult and such. Whereas this one, she asks the same question every time. And there is no update, it is just like she has forgotten who I am every time. It is a new person I talk to every time. Sometimes she says the right things, but her heart is not in it. She just says it because she has to. That's how it feels. That's how I experience it (Sia, ID09-INT01).

I don't think she was as ... much inviting a conversation as the previous ones were. She sat very much and looked down in her papers and scribbled, and seemed very absent in a way. It was obvious that she had done this many times before and knew what kind of offers she should pull out her sleeve (Ida, ID07-INT01).

In the excerpts above, both Sia and Ida describe the experience of a caseworker who signals with her body language that she is not really paying attention. The positive experiences involve caseworkers who are good at practising active listening, signalling that they actually care about the young people's thoughts and feelings, whereas the caseworker experiences described here are of very passive people.

Sia interprets this as being 'very practically oriented and very data focused', what could be described as the caseworker being very 'task-oriented', whereas Ida experiences it as not really paying attention. Sia goes on to describe this type of caseworker experience very explicitly as an experience of caseworkers who 'do not care' about her or are 'not invested', and as having left here with a sense of the caseworker not empathising with her.

Sia and Ida express clear dissatisfaction and frustration with the caseworker experiences described here. Sia even subsequently went to great lengths to change her caseworker, something that required her to insist that this was what she needed in what she experienced as a very unpleasant phone meeting with a manager at the Jobcentre. However, even though she described

in the subsequent interview how she had been affected emotionally by the confrontation with the manager, she also described it as something which she had been able to let go of within a few days, and by the time of the interview about a month later she was able to talk about it without displaying any negative emotions.

In contrast to these relatively minor frustrations, there are two instances in the data of people who experienced higher levels of frustration and anger as a result of experiencing indifferent caseworkers. These most extreme examples of negative experiences are characterised by a combination of young people who find themselves in a very precarious situation, and frontline workers who show no empathy or willingness to try to help.

There are only two of these extreme cases in my data and they both involve encounters with the benefits office. Here, frontline workers have much less discretion than the Education Consultants and Company Consultants do, since they are managing relatively simple and inflexible rules of eligibility for assistance. The young people generally describe their encounters with frontline workers at the benefits office as very rules-based and focused on getting through the necessary tasks to check eligibility, such as for example documentation checks. In most circumstances, these meetings transpire without any greater issues (although, as described in the previous chapter, the documentation process can be somewhat unpleasant). However, both of the extreme cases involve young people in desperate need of immediate financial support, who then experience being denied this support by the benefits office.

In March or February, where I was sitting and saying, 'I won't get anything to eat the next month, I can't pay my rent, I will be evicted and my relationship is probably going down the drain, and I don't know if I can stay at my mum's because there isn't room anymore, she has just moved, and my dad doesn't have a place right now'. I was all alone in the world and nobody wanted to help me. And that feeling was probably one of the worst feelings I have had in my life. And that this person is sitting in front of me, with a completely blank face and is just like 'I don't make the rules, I can't do anything'. Then help me find out how I can bend these rules! You can't tell me that this is just how it is. You can't tell me that. Denmark is a welfare state goddamnit! There must be something that can be done! It can't be right that I have to go down and sell my body on the street to get food on the table. And to not get evicted from my home. It was SO unpleasant. Because, again, they are just sitting there with a blank face, like 'it is not my responsibility, I can't change that'. I just can't comprehend how you can do that. If it was me I would have said, 'you know what, your situation is shit, I am really sorry that you are feeling like this'. Not even that they could give me. It was very cynical, very sterile and technical (Signe, ID03-INT01).

Signe describes here a situation where she had stopped receiving her education stipend and had a gap of a month without any income before she was allowed to apply for benefits. Without any savings or any other sources of money, she did not know how to cover her expenses.

It should be clear from Signe's description above that talking about this experience, even about half a year later, still triggers a lot of anger. This is clearly a result of being met with indifference in a desperate situation. However, what is interesting here is perhaps not so much Signe's frustration about not getting help, although that is of course important, but more so the importance she attaches to being met by an empathetic human being. It is not just the lack of concrete help with her economic situation that makes the situation unpleasant, but also the fact that the frontline worker does not express empathy with her situation. There is a feeling of being dehumanised, which is illustrative of how indifference can feel at its most extreme.

Jack provides a very similar description of anger and frustration as the result of a lack of empathy by the benefits office in a situation of financial duress.

It was perhaps a bit my fault, because it was the first month, the first time I found out that I would not get any benefits. And I hadn't had so many shifts in the month before, but they subtracted everything I was supposed to get anyway, so I didn't have any money, and I was stressed, I didn't know what was going to happen. So I called my economy caseworker and said 'hey, what's up? I have no money, can you ... isn't there something you can do?' And she explained the system, and I was stressed out, and I yelled a bit. And it was just the way she told me ... she was like a ... it was unempathetic. And in that situation I was really afraid and frustrated. Because I am an adult and I had no money for myself.

... So I yelled a bit because she was unempathetic, she couldn't think outside the box about what she could do. But the others, when it comes to that situation, they are a bit more understanding. They say to me, 'I know it is stupid and ... it is a bit more difficult, right. I can see that it isn't working'. They are just doing what the system tells them. And that is that show, where they can't do anything for me. But I can see that they understand, and they would like to do something, but they can't, so they just say 'these are the options, it isn't good, but...', you know. Maybe it is the kind of people-skills they have (Jack, ID05-INT01).

Again, Jack explains clearly how his frustration and anger results not just from not getting the help he needed, but even more so from the lack of empathy shown by the benefits office worker. In both cases, there is a feeling of having their humanity denied, not just from being denied the support they desperately need, but by being denied their right to their feelings of fear, frustration, and anger, by not feeling seen or heard by caseworkers.

As mentioned already, it is significant that both Signe's and Jack's experiences are with the benefits office and not with their regular caseworkers (Education Consultants and Company Consultants). The former are primarily administrators, who follow very specific regulations and have limited discretion. The latter have much more discretion and are more inclined to focus on understanding the young person's needs in order to figure out how best to help them. In this way, discretion is what allows for the human relationship to exist – with no discretion, there is also no need for, or room for, a personal, human, relation.

7.3.3. The controlling caseworker

As the examples in the previous section show, it can be bad enough for the young people to feel that caseworkers are indifferent to their needs. However, there are also experiences that go beyond indifference, experiences of caseworkers actively trying to exert pressure on the young people to comply with conditionalities.

As mentioned above, having caseworkers check in on you is often described in positive terms by the young people, as a signal of caring. However, whether this 'checking-in' is felt as caring or controlling depends on the content of the conversation. If a caseworker calls just to ask about how someone is doing, focusing on their wellbeing or mental health, this makes a positive impression, but if they call to tell someone what they should be doing, or to make sure that they are attending activities, a phone call can also be perceived as controlling.

I have had one caseworker previously, who mostly just called me to rattle off what I ought to get done. And that felt a bit controlling. That was just checking that I attended the course and my treatment (Anne, ID10-INT04).

In this excerpt, Anne describes her experience of receiving calls from a caseworker, which were only focusing on telling her what she ought to do. These experiences do not only come from caseworkers who are consciously trying to control the young people, but also simply from caseworkers who have a communication style where they tend to provide guidance and suggestions, rather than listening to the young people's own accounts of their situation.

My present caseworker, I think, talks a bit much. You know, it is like she sounds like she wants to give advice and, you know, really likes to say 'try to look into' or 'try to take this perspective', you know, she likes to be like that. She is very sweet, it's not that, but it just seems like she is a lot like 'this is how it ought to be, and this is how you should think about it', and, you know, 'if you just do it like this, because you can't do this', and such, you know? (Christian, ID14-INT01).

In this excerpt, Christian describes how his caseworker, despite her best intentions, comes off as controlling, because she has a tendency to provide suggestions, rather than practising active listening. Anne describes a more controlling experience:

I have received a lot of pressure from her. She wanted to hear if I had any idea about when I was ready to start education. About how long I planned to stay in the course, how long I planned to be medicated. If I had any ideas for other educations, if I had any ideas about taking a job, because she had seen that I had had a job before. She asked about our expenses out here, and when I told her that we have a pretty high rent here, she was like, 'well, move then'. That's the only take away I got, that she thought we should move. And that's what I know about her now.

It seemed like she was in much more of a hurry and was a lot less interested in whether I was getting better, and what was happening and so on ... because it seemed like she just had to get some kids out the door. So, exactly the opposite impression than what I got from [name of previous caseworker].

It was a lot more practical questions than personal, and a lot more, where are we going, than where are we (Anne, ID10-INT01).

In this excerpt, Anne describes an experience of being put under pressure in general, with an expectation that she should make faster progress. She emphasises in particular the caseworker's suggestion that she ought to move to a cheaper home as something that she perceived as very unreasonable and an example of an attempt to control her life in an area that is not within her remit.

The first caseworker I had, she didn't listen at all to what I said. She asked me a question and then she talked over my answer. So I was a bit like, none of us gets anything out of that. I don't get anything out of it and you don't get anything out of it, because you don't get the information you want, if you keep talking over my answer. So I thought that was very frustrating. It wasn't even a conversation, it was a monologue.

And then also the last meeting with the caseworker and the Company Consultant, where it was a bit like: 'well, we assess that this is how the situation should be, you just have to work your way up to full time'. Where I am a bit like, 'listen to my needs, listen to my limitations, I am not telling you this to be funny, there is a reason I am in this situation here, and it is not just because I can't find a job, or ... it is actually because I have some issues, which mean that I am sitting here...' So I thought that was difficult, because it sounded like they took those things into account in the beginning, but afterwards they were like 'now we have assessed that this is what it is like, so that's how it is'. And again, you feel like someone who isn't of age and that someone, almost like a parent, sits there and says 'this is what you need to do, and we have seen that this is the situation'. But

listen to me! I am the one in the situation. You are looking at it from the outside. I am the one in it, so try and listen to what I am telling you. I am not saying it for no reason. I think that has been frustrating as hell, also because I have friends who have been in the system and has gotten something positive out of it (Signe, ID03-INT02).

Here, Signe expresses the frustration of not feeling that the caseworkers listen to her or take her needs seriously. There has been a negative development over time with regards to this, where she felt they listened more to her in the beginning, but now, after several job placements that have not led to anything, they are less patient and more likely to enforce their own beliefs and priorities on her.

Signe experience this as signalling that they believe that she has not been contributing enough to the relationship, by not making sufficient progress towards their perceived goal of her working full time.

As is perhaps apparent from the excerpt, Signe has a rather forceful personality; she is prone to expecting to get what she wants, and loudly protesting if she does not get it, which has perhaps also contributed to a worsening of the relationship with her caseworkers. Her strong personality and high energy perhaps also mean that the caseworkers are less likely to recognise her limitations, because she seems like someone who would not have any problem working full time.

This is however not aligned with Signe's own experience of her needs and what she is capable of. She also expresses a strong need for autonomy here, and finds the lack of support for her autonomy and recognition of her own agency extremely frustrating.

There are also more extreme cases of controlling experiences, where people feel that they are being pressured to do things they do not want to do. These experiences are relatively rare, yet illustrative of the mechanisms at play.

As I said, it was a little scary suddenly to receive these ultimatums and be ... well, shaken up almost [exhales]. So, I don't know ... It wasn't a nice experience, certainly. But I can also see a bit where they are coming from. There are probably some people they have more issues with than me, regarding benefits and such. For me it was a relatively easy choice, if it was to either have to do something which I had no interest in at all, or to stop [benefits]. It wasn't like I needed the benefit to survive. So even though it was scary, it was still a bit at a distance so to speak (Theis, ID13-INT04).

I had a temporary caseworker when I worked at [supermarket], because she had the connection with [supermarket] and she threatened me ... or [there is] threatened and threatened, right, but she said to me.... that I could start this warehouse job ... where I say that it is impossible because I can't get there in the morning, there are no busses ... where she actually threatened me and said that

if I do not take that job, I will have to search for work and search and search, and I will have to search and I won't make any money on it and such.

... I didn't say anything, but I could just feel my temper rising when she said those things. Where I was like, what makes you think you can say something like that to me, you are here to help me, not to threaten me. You are not my Company Consultant, you are not even my caseworker (Alfred, UB09-INT02).

In the above excerpts, Theis and Alfred both describe the experience of being threatened with consequences because they reject job offers which they are not interested in. They both describe feelings of shock and then anger at being treated in ways that are unexpected and perceived as unfair. Coincidentally, both of these cases involve young people who live at home with their parents and have signed up for benefits to receive support in finding work and guidance on education, not because they are financially dependent on receiving benefits.

This means that, even though they experienced these instances as very unpleasant, their livelihoods were not threatened and therefore they always had the option to exit the benefits system without any financial consequences (even though they explained that this would have felt like failing). While others may have felt that they had to comply with the demands, both Theis and Alfred instead complained to their regular caseworkers (Education Consultants) who in both cases reassured them that they would not have to engage in activities that they did not want to do.

7.3.4. Conclusions

In this section, I have described three ideal-typical experiences of caseworkers described by interviewees. First, the caring caseworker is associated with young people's experiences of being listened to and being involved in decision-making processes. These caseworkers try as much as possible to support citizens' own initiatives, and trust people to know what is best for them.

Interviewees describe a sense that the caseworker is present and attentive, which signals an interest in understanding their issues, and a sense that the caseworker cares about their wellbeing. This in turn is essential for the building of trust.

The experience can perhaps be summarised as one of caseworkers who signal that they care about the individual young person and that they trust in their ability to make decisions. This creates a feeling of mattering to the other person, which is important for people's need for relatedness. It also creates a feeling of being someone who deserves other people's respect and trust, and who is competent and able to make their own decisions. Finally, it supports people's sense of autonomy by allowing them to pursue their own initiatives.

On the contrary, the caseworkers experienced as indifferent are perceived to not pay attention, as not being fully present nor interested in the wellbeing of citizens. More than anything, this experience is characterised as one of a lack of empathy. The main implication of this type of experience as regards basic psychological needs is an undermining of the sense of relatedness.

Finally, the controlling caseworker is perceived to emphasise their own ideas and solutions over those put forward by citizens. Instead of listening to and support people's own initiatives, they make suggestions and place demands on people based on their own beliefs about what is best for the person.

The implications are that autonomy is thwarted, as people are being pressured to do things that are not aligned with their preferences; relatedness is undermined, as there is no attempt to listen to or signal caring about the person's wellbeing; and competence is undermined by the signalling of lack of trust in people's abilities to make decisions for themselves. Table 12 sums up these findings.

Table 12: Caseworker experiences

Caseworker experiences	Characteristics	Support for basic psychological needs
Caring	Trust	Supports relatedness by showing empathy, presence, and by practising active listening
	Involvement	
	Active listening	Supports autonomy by supporting initiatives
	Being present	
	Supporting initiatives	Supports competence by trusting people's abilities to make decisions
	Showing an interest	
Indifferent	Not attentive	Undermines need for relatedness by not taking an interest in the other person's views
	Not listening to understand	
	No empathy	
Controlling	Emphasising own ideas and solutions instead of listening and supporting citizens' initiatives	Undermines sense of autonomy by applying pressure to comply with demands
	Pressuring people to comply with expectations or demands	Undermines relatedness by not practising active listening
		Undermines competence by not showing trust in people's ability to make decisions for themselves

7.4. How should we understand experiences of encounters with caseworkers?

Having now described how and why the relationship with caseworkers is so important for the young people, I move on to examining in more detail how the young people experience their relationship with caseworkers. I show how the relationship is experienced as a very personal relationship, with reciprocity and trust as key guiding norms. Furthermore, it is also a relationship which often changes over time.

7.4.1. A personal relationship

The young people generally see the encounters with the caseworkers as a relationship with another human being; at least, the positive experiences are characterised like this, while the negative experiences are characterised by the absence of a feeling of relating to the caseworker as another human being.

To what extent I have been this, what do you call it, ‘system persona’, I don’t know. It has been one-on-one. It has been between me and a caseworker. It has been between us human beings, and it has been between, it has been very human in that we have tried in conjunction to figure out how we can, you know, make use of the system. So it hasn’t been one-sided. It hasn’t been me that has had a meeting with the system. It has been me and a caseworker that have tried to figure out, first of all, how to get resources out of the system (Bo, ID17-INT04).

In this excerpt, Bo describes his relationship with his caseworker as a cooperation, with the caseworker as an ally in his attempt to figure out ‘the system’. As mentioned already in the previous chapter, the inhuman system is here juxtaposed with the human caseworker, and Bo describes his relationship with the caseworker as ‘very human’.

A perhaps surprising finding about the young people’s experience of the relationships with caseworkers is the extent to which it seems to be governed by social norms related to personal human relationships, rather than rules and regulations. Even though the relationship is obviously to some extent shaped by the fact that it happens within the framework of ‘the system’ described above, the extent to which it is governed by rigid rules and regulations is remarkably limited. This is contrary to what I expected, as the active labour market system in Denmark is complex and characterised by detailed process regulations (as described in Chapter 5 above).

In addition, the relationships seemed to be very much governed by principles such as trust and reciprocity. These principles do not always support the young people’s wellbeing, as for example reciprocity may be interpreted in a way that requires people to contribute more than they are able to.

However, interviewees themselves clearly prefer this kind of personal relationship with another human being to a more formal or technical, rule-based, relationship. As mentioned above, this is largely because of the very personal nature of the issues they face, meaning that for the young people, the relationship is inevitably personal. They expect and want caseworkers to recognise the importance of their issues on a human level by also investing something in the relationship.

None of the young people described being presented with clear-cut demands, which they had to comply with under threat of having their benefits removed. Instead, much softer or fluffier expectations were communicated in a very indirect manner by caseworkers in meetings. As is apparent from some of the quotes I present below, the young people attempt to glean what is expected of them from things like gestures and tone of voice in the encounter with caseworkers. The relationship can therefore be characterised as based on blurred, or informal, expectations, rather than a legalistic approach to well-defined rights and responsibilities.

In other words, my expectation was that the encounter would operate based on the rational legal principles of the state: command, rules, and authority that generates complicity. However, instead the relationship works more like a network, which operates on the basis of trust and reciprocity that generates cooperative behaviour. This does not mean that there is no exercise of power, but that this happens through different means: through perceived obligations and expectations, rather than through 'hard' threats of sanctions.

In the literature on welfare conditionalities, there is often an implicit assumption of a very asymmetric power relation between frontline workers and citizens. The basic premise of the relationship is that caseworkers have the power to take away citizens' income, or force them to participate in activities under threat of sanctioning them if they do not comply.

However, in practice, the relationship, at least in the Danish context, is a lot more nuanced. What is perhaps surprising is how little emphasis there is in the meeting between caseworkers and citizens on the 'hard' power of conditionalities and sanctions. Instead, what happens is that frontline workers and citizens together establish common expectations about what should happen and what the young people have to do in order to be eligible to keep receiving benefits.

Caseworkers' powers lie mostly in their ability to define the content of basic norms such as the norm of reciprocity of rights and duties. However, while the young people are keen to adjust their behaviour to the expectations of caseworkers, they are not without agency: they do have their own expectations and norms about boundaries, and they will protest against perceived transgressions.

7.4.2. A reciprocal relationship

Effect studies of ALMPs often base their hypotheses on a rational choice model of human behaviour. However, as I show in this section, the young people's behaviour is in fact more guided by social norms and their perceived expectations about what it means to be a good citizen. Their primary concern is to align their behaviour with what is expected of them. At the same time, they also hold certain expectations about what is acceptable behaviour for the frontline workers – expectations that are partly formed over time through repeated experiences of encounters with these caseworkers.

The young people characterise this relationship as one that requires reciprocity: they need both to feel that they can trust their caseworker and that the caseworker trusts them. Similarly, they recognise that a good relationship requires that both parties are willing to give something. They recognise that they themselves need to be willing to open up about their experiences, to show that they are willing to 'play by the rules' and that they are making progress. In turn, the caseworker is expected to listen, to show empathy, and to do their best to find the right activities for the young people.

Based on the interviews, it is clear to the young people that the benefits they are receiving are not provided unconditionally. However, it is not always completely clear to them what the conditionalities actually are: perceived conditionalities do not include simply attending meetings and activities, but also include for example showing progress, showing that one is motivated for exiting benefits, and saying yes to offers even if they are not mandatory. These are the kind of symbolic gifts that the young people provide in reciprocity for receiving benefits.

Bo: I think a big part of the reason is that you have to give something yourself also, and I think a lot of people who have been in my position forget that. That you also have to give something of yourself, personally, before the other person is invested in you. And it makes sense: you are not invested in something that you don't feel that you get something out of. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: What is it that you think you should give to get something back?

Bo: It is important to talk about how big a help it has been and how much it means. And it is important to form a relation with the people you have in front of you. And I know that she potentially has many citizens she has to attend to. But the fact that I know that it doesn't feel like she is just a function where she is, that she is invested in me as a citizen, so I think that means something for her too (Bo, ID17-INT04).

Bo speaks here based on many years of experience of dealing with caseworkers, and a proven track record of getting what he wants from the system. His

main lesson, as he describes above, has been that you have to invest yourself in the relationship with the caseworker, in a way that makes the caseworker feel that they get something from the relationship as well.

Again, we see here how aware the young people are of trying to see the world from their caseworker's point of view, in order to live up to their expectations. His description also emphasises the importance of reciprocity as a basic principle in the relationship with caseworkers – both parties need to feel that they get something out of the relation.

Well, I have to play along. You have to. If I get some offers, it is ... Well, I don't just get resources thrown at me without having to do part of the work myself. But when I show that I want to handle my education and such, then I think she also understands that I don't have to sit in that rehabilitation. If I show that I can. If I show that I can be constructive, then that's proof enough that I don't need the help, I think (Bo, ID17-INT04).

Bo describes well here the principle of having to contribute something in order to get something else. What he gets in this relationship with the caseworker is both 'resources' in the form of benefits and other forms of support, as well as the caseworker's understanding. In return for this he has to 'play along', meaning that he has to accept the offers he is receiving, or at least show that he is responsible and making progress, if he wants the caseworker to accept him saying no to an offer.

What he is talking about here more specifically is an offer to participate in a rehabilitation course. He does not himself think that he needs this and would prefer not to have to attend. However, he senses that it is expected of him to participate in the course in order to get other things that he wants. In order to avoid participating in the course, he instead offers something else, namely showing that he is able to make progress on his education (a part-time math course he is taking while on benefits).

Bo: I could have said no. But I also think, in my head, I also consider, how does my image look about this? Do I look like a person that is just slacking, or don't I? I don't want to look like a person that just doesn't want to accept help, and just stay on the support offer that is there, and which is clearly not very challenging. You know, I want to move on, I want to be challenged.

Interviewer: Why is it important to signal that, and to who? Is it to those at [course provider] or is it to the caseworker?

Bo: I just think that it feels like it is to [course provider], who is in touch with the Jobcentre, but also the Jobcentre. I know that [course provider] and the teachers there, they wish us the best, 100 percent. But it feels like the Jobcentre as an organisation kinda also needs to know that I would like to move on, that I am not just here to take up space, which other people could use.

Interviewer: Where do you think that feeling comes from? Is it something which is communicated through...

Bo: I think it is communicated through, what should I say, talking to people at the Jobcentre and people who are associated with the Jobcentre, that they are like, 'remember that...' It just feels like that. I just think that is the kind of atmosphere they give, that ... yes, that you shouldn't look like you are just one of those who wants to just sit and be a scrounger, you know.

Interviewer: So is it from your caseworker, or is it ...

Bo: I don't know if it is both from ... I think it is both from the caseworker ... I think it is also an opinion I have. Or what should I say, a point of view I have acquired through many years, also just from knowing many people and living in an area with a lot of vulnerable people. I think it is just something in your head, you don't want to be one of those who just sit still and do it to get money. First of all, I think it is wrong and shameful to do. If you have the resources ... I find it difficult to imagine people actually doing this, but I know that many people are afraid to send that signal. You don't want to be the lazy person, you know (Bo, ID17-INT01).

In this excerpt, Bo describes the norms and expectations he perceives to be important in his relationship with the Jobcentre and how he navigates them. He describes how he deems it important to show that he is motivated to make progress, in order to not be considered a 'scrounger', which he understands as someone who is satisfied with staying on benefits indefinitely.

He is not sure where these norms and expectations come from, but experiences them partly as something that is communicated by the Jobcentre and partly as an expression of broader social norms (which he professes to share himself). He describes a fear, both in himself and among people he knows, of being labelled as 'lazy' and a scrounger.

This is also about deservingness: he deems it important to show that he is worthy of the Jobcentre's support, that there will be a return to society's investment in him, so to speak. The way to signal this motivation, according to Bo, is mainly to accept the offers that the Jobcentre provides. Saying no too often would be problematic, as it would signal a lack of motivation to 'move forward', understood as making progress towards exiting benefits and starting work or education.

If it has come up, it has been because they have been told that now it is time for a job placement. It is often about, if you need an extension, then you need to be able to give something in return. And that is usually a job placement or more hours on the course. That there has to be some kind of progression in order to ... unless it is a special case. So at one point, I started a job placement at a time

where I wasn't really ready for it, but then I had said yes and it was a bit like: 'a bargain is a bargain, and if you want to ... (Sia, ID09-INT02).

A very common type of give-and-take described by the young people involves the participation in a job placement in return for being granted an extension at a course. As we will see later when we arrive at the discussion of the specific interventions, these courses are often very important to the young people, as ways to recover from mental health issues and as venues for their social lives. Course extensions are provided for periods of three months at a time. Several of the young people described a type of direct exchange between course extensions and participation in job placements. Participation in job placements functions in these cases as a way for the young people to fulfil their obligation to make progress towards education or work. In the above excerpt, Sia describes this reciprocal relationship very clearly.

These expectations and norms are partly something the young people have with them from the general public discourse about ALMPs in Denmark or from stories they have heard from family and friends. However, it is also something which is communicated in meetings with caseworkers.

Interviewer: Do you feel that they have certain expectations about what you should do?

Theis: Yes, there is always somehow a hidden agenda, I feel. There is ... They try, like, to ... They try to get at something education minded or job minded ... It is not like I am being pushed into something. But they try at least to guide you a bit down that road. That's what they are supposed to do, of course. Their goal is to get people into education or work, so it's fair that that's the line of thinking they have, but you can... You can feel it on them sometimes, that they try to push things along a bit.

Interviewer: How can you feel that?

Theis: First of all, I think that, in my experience, it is that, ehm, that when you say something about education or work, then you can hear on them ... Now, I have only had phone conversations, but you can hear on the voice that there is something, like they hear some word or something. Some kind of key word or something, like they have a list of keywords. Then you can hear that 'hey, here is a word we can check on the list here', that he said this, and then they get something going there. So you can hear on the voice that they get going on something. And the other thing is that you can also hear ... with some of them, when you talk about some things they are a lot less engaged in the conversation, then it is more a monologue, where I sit and talk, but when you get into other topics, where you can hear that there are some things, also about education or work, they are a lot more active as well, and bring in more ideas and alternatives than what they would otherwise do.

... you can feel on them a bit that they try to ... they try to shape the conversation along the goals they have themselves. You can sense that. It isn't... for me it isn't something that has been overwhelming or that they have only been talking about education or work, but you can sense that they have some underlying goals (Theis, ID13-INT02).

In the above excerpt, Theis provides a good description of how the young people in practice sense what is expected of them, even if specific demands are never explicitly articulated. They gauge the topics that caseworkers emphasise and engage with in conversations, and interpret things like tone of voice (in phone conversations) and body language (in physical meetings) to understand what kinds of behaviour are encouraged and what kinds are discouraged.

Interviewer: Do [name of course provider manager] also have expectations about your progress, or how does she look at it?

Ida: No, she is a lot more relaxed in that way. I think she takes it a lot like it comes. There isn't in the same way the 'well, now I think this and that should happen'. On the contrary, she is much better at saying, 'are you sure about this and that. Are you sure that you are ready? Remember that you can always pull out'. She has a lot of focus on us as people, I would say.

Interviewer: And what about your caseworker?

Ida: I don't know. I haven't been a caseworker, but I think maybe there is a lot of pressure on them to get us off and going again. Also that we almost don't have any relation with her. I have talked to her very few times. I could count it on one hand I am sure. With [course provider manager] we have a very different relation, so I think she sees me more as a whole person, where I for [caseworker] is just another citizen in the row. Even though she is very good at saying that we do things at my speed, at the same time, she also need to see some progression. It is a little strange.

Interviewer: It is interesting, I think, that it is not stated openly what the requirements are? It is very fluffy in a way?

Ida: Yes, it really is. Because it wasn't like she said, 'you have to do this now'. So it is possible that I had been allowed to continue at [course] without the job placement. But it came in, in a manner where it ... it sounded like something has to start happening now. A little strange. I don't know, it is possible that it is just my interpretation that's like that, of course it is just subjective, right. But it was a strange conversation (Ida, ID07-INT02).

In the above excerpt, Ida elaborates on her experience of sensing that she has to agree to participate in a job placement in order to get an extension at her course. The excerpt shows clearly how there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding these sort of 'hidden' conditionalities, resulting from the vagueness with which

they are communicated. Ida is not completely certain whether she has the right idea about what is required of her, and it is likely this uncertainty which makes her describe the conversation as 'strange'.

Most interviewees describe in one way or another the need to be strategic about how to present themselves to caseworkers. The young people perceive it to be important to strike the right balance between demonstrating enough progress to show cooperation and willingness, but not so much progress that they will no longer receive the support they want (often participation in courses).

You may imagine yourself as one of these young people. You feel that you are making progress in improving your mental health because of the psycho-education course you are attending, and you would like to continue this course work. If you are not demonstrating that you are making progress, the caseworker may perceive this as indicating that the course is not working and decide that you should try something else. On the other hand, if you demonstrate too much progress, the caseworker may decide that you have gained all that you could from the course and are ready for something else, most likely a job placement.

Pelle: It is like this, I have noticed now here later when I have started saying that I am feeling good when she calls, instead of saying 'well, I still feel really shitty'. When I just said 'well, I am not feeling well, but I feel that [course] is helping a bit'. I could feel that I should focus on what helps, because she was like 'but does the course do anything at all?' And yes, I think it does. And if I had said no there, then they would probably have started pushing a bit for something else. But it was a lot about making her aware of what is helping me and moving me in the right direction. That is my sense of what they would like to know: that you are moving on. There was a month or two ago or something like that, where I felt things were going well, and I started saying to my caseworker also: now it is going quite well actually, and I would like it to continue. And I could feel that she was a bit like, 'okay, now it is going well, then we should add something, right, then you might just as well start searching for work, and you might just as well this and that', right?

Interviewer: And how did you react to that?

Pelle: Then I could feel that I should pull back a little. Because 'erhm, I am not doing *that* well'. So you had to kind of retract it a bit again. And I just felt like saying that it was going really well, because compared to just two months previously, there had been so much progress, and how could it be two months from now if that continued? And then I had to explain to her that I didn't think the best would be to go out and try with an education or work right away, and just try it. Because next time has to be a success, at least with education. I don't want to start again and then find that I can't do it (Pelle, UBo2-INT01).

In this excerpt, Pelle explains the kind of push and pull that often takes place between caseworkers and citizens. While many of the social policy interventions the group of young people receive are in reality aimed at improving their mental health, the underlying premise still comes from the fact that it is the Jobcentre that delivers the intervention: there is an underlying focus on making progress towards either starting education or work. Caseworkers therefore have an inclination to push the young people to 'make progress', which is usually understood as gradually taking on more hours of activation, or moving from courses to job placements.

Theoretically, according to SDT, this is necessary for building a sense of competence, which requires being challenged at the right level. This is what caseworkers are trying to do, by gauging whether people are being challenged enough, or need more to do.

However, as Pelle describes in the excerpt, it can create issues if the caseworkers' incentive to push for more progress is combined with young people who have a sense that they are not allowed to say no, or who are not themselves very aware of what their needs and limitations are. This can then result in vulnerable people being pushed into activities that they are unable to handle.

Ellen: I have always been a bit afraid that if I said no to things ... at the municipality and such, that they would stop giving me money.

Interviewer: Is that something that they have told you explicitly?

Ellen: No, they haven't. It is an idea I have gotten, that if I don't follow it, I will end up on the street. It is a great fear I have ... Yes, it is a little scary that someone can tell you what to do ... or, have so much power over you somehow.

Interviewer: So how does that affect the meetings you have with them?

Ellen: I think I have a tendency to be pleasing, 'oh, I am doing well', but not too well, because then they can send you into work. So it is a lot about trying to figure out what they would like to hear, in order for it to be as good for me as possible. It is also something that is talked about down at [course], that you shouldn't say that you are doing too well, because then they think that you are just ready. But yes, very pleasing I think.

Interviewer: That sounds like a difficult balance?

Ellen: Yes, it is. But I am so lucky that my caseworker is really sweet. Luckily. And has had a good understanding of my situation ... Yes.

Interviewer: How do you strike that balance? Does it mean that you choose what you emphasise when you talk to her? Or do you feel that you can be honest with her?

Ellen: I feel that I am fairly honest. Some things I perhaps avoid.

Interviewer: What might that be for example?

Ellen: For example, if I have a good period, then I don't tell her that I have a good period. Even though she is sweet, what if she takes it the wrong way? That I just ... then you have to go out into [supermarket chain] and stand there (Ellen, UB01-INT01).

As Ellen describes here, it can be difficult for the young persons to figure out how to strike the right balance when presenting their situation to caseworkers. Even though she trusts her caseworker and describes her as a very sweet person who understands her situation, she is still afraid that she will be pressured to participate in activities she does not want or is not ready for, if she presents herself in too positive a light. This relates back to the discussion in Chapter 6 about the influence of the overall context: the expectation to continuously make progress and the underlying threat of sanctions in case of non-compliance means that people do not feel that they can be completely honest with their caseworkers.

It is worth noting here that Ellen is not a particularly calculating person. Her behaviour is not motivated by trying to 'game' the system. However, she has a history of depression and anxiety and is trying to handle the demands of the system in a way that ensures that she will not be put in a situation that will be detrimental to her mental health.

Interviewer: Did you talk to the caseworker about that it didn't work out or how did you handle it?

Jane: Yes. Well I, what should I say, called in sick Monday to Tuesday, I think, or something. And then Tuesday I talked to my caseworker about that, that I had called in sick and stuff, because they also need to know when you are sick from the job placement. And then I talked to her about it, and she was really good at asking about how I was doing, and about how it had been going, and stuff like that. I started really by saying, 'well, it was fine, I was just ... didn't feel so well today'. And then she asked ... I think she could sense that it wasn't good. And then she asked ... she kept asking about it and in the end I broke [small laugh] ... And said that, that I probably couldn't ... that it didn't help me so much to be there.

Interviewer: How come you didn't want to tell her at first?

Jane: [small laugh]. Well, it is this thing about ... I am afraid to not deserve to get help. I don't know, I am just ... I don't like to cause problems. So it was a bit like ... now they had finally found a job placement for me, and then I can't ...

Interviewer: So you think about this job placement thing as also a way to prove that you deserve it?

Jane: Yes, I would like to show that I haven't ... it is not because I want to be on benefits. It is not because I don't want to contribute. And I really want to find a way where it is possible, but it is just difficult right now. And I am afraid to show that it is difficult.

Interviewer: But how was this job placement presented? I understand that it was not something you came up with yourself, but have you experienced it as a demand that you had to do a job placement in order to keep receiving benefits?

Jane: I think that's a difficult question, because it isn't said at any time that that's what it is like. But I think maybe, at least for me, it comes to a kind of pressure that lies there. Again, it is because I would like to do something, and when I get benefits, I feel that I don't do anything for it, and I feel really bad about it. So I would like ... I really want to participate in all the suggestions they have. So it becomes in a way a ... not so much, you have to in order to get benefits, but a pressure in a certain way.

Interviewer: Where does that pressure come from? Is it from yourself mainly, or is it from your caseworker? Who is it you feel you need to satisfy?

Jane: It is probably a mix, but mostly myself, I think. Well, yes it is mainly myself, but, but it is also ... I wouldn't say that it is only ... because it is said many times ... Oh, it's difficult to answer.

Interviewer: Do you have the experience that they have certain expectations about how you should behave?

Jane: Well, yes and no. A little, yes. But I don't know. Well, yes, because when we talk about it, there comes this pressure about it, but when I then ... if we talk just two weeks later, and I have told that I have done what we have talked about, not just job placements, but things like looking into what options there are ... Because [course] that I am attending now, that was something I found myself and stuff like that. It is a funny thing, because when we talk about it I think there is a pressure and I ... I don't know if it is me or them that puts it there, but then when we talk about it later, I get a little angry with myself because they are always so surprised that I have done what we talked about. And then I can't help thinking about if it is because I am doing things wrong, or because they are just not used to people reacting so quickly ... they always sound so surprised, I think (Jane, UB03-INT01).

In this excerpt, Jane speaks about the strong social norm she experiences of having to contribute to society and to not be a burden on others. It perhaps speaks to the strong need for relatedness: the fear of social exclusion and stigmatisation if one is seen as not wanting to contribute to society.

Her description of wanting to conceal her inability to live up to the norm of contributing – saying, that she is 'afraid to show that it is difficult' – is very much in line with Goffman's description of the experience of stigma as the

shame of failing to meet the expectations of others, and how this causes people to conceal their shortcomings as a protective measure (Goffman, 1963). Jane finds it difficult to describe precisely her motivation for participating in job placements, but focuses mainly on the feeling of having to contribute something in return for getting benefits – that she feels she *should* be doing something.

However, she also describes this as a feeling of pressure. The concept of ‘introjected motivation’ from SDT seems useful to understand this feeling: this refers to a social norm which has not been completely integrated, which is why she feels pressured by it, even though there is no explicit external pressure being applied.

In this case, the social norm of having to contribute to society is not good for her wellbeing (this is in line with SDT’s expectations, as it predicts introjected motivation to have negative effects on wellbeing) – she feels pressured into participating in a job placement that she is not fit for, with the result being that she has to call in sick. This in turn has a negative impact on her feeling of competence.

For these young people, the feeling of relatedness, understood as social inclusion, is incredibly important, and it is therefore very problematic for them when they experience not being able to live up to what they believe is required of them to achieve social inclusion – the requirement to contribute to society. It is also clear that Jane is very self-deprecating, and very much attuned to trying to do what her caseworker expects of her, to the extent that she is worried about whether her behaviour is inappropriate even when she does everything she had agreed on with the caseworker.

Interviewer: About making this decision about job placement. It sounds like you have had quite a lot of influence on what it should be, but the decision about doing a job placement, that is an expectation somehow. Has the caseworker said explicitly that that’s a requirement?

Ida: No, she hasn’t said that it’s a requirement, but she has talked about wanting to see some progression. It was very indirect. It wasn’t like: ‘you have to do this, otherwise you can’t stay at [course]’, right. It was just like ... more like a discrete suggestion, or ... It was very subtle, but she somehow made it clear that she had to see that there is progress in my development for it to make sense that I am allowed to stay at [course]. I think it was like that she said it.

Interviewer: What do you take that to mean, ‘progress in your development’?

Ida: Well, for me ... She started talking about that job placement and I was just like: ‘yes, okay, that might be ...’ I am willing to try it at least, if you know ... I think it is about social resilience. That she can see that some things change, and that I become more aware about some of my thought processes and such. I

imagine it is things like this her and [course provider manager] write when they make reports (Ida, ID07-INT01).

Here, Ida also talks about the perceived expectation of ‘making progress’, and what this means for her personally. It seems here that it is this felt expectation of having to display progress that provides the basic impetus for considering participating in a job placement. On the basis of feeling that she has to participate, she then rationalises her participation with reference to the possibility of testing her limits, a rationalisation that is developed in dialogue with advisors at the psycho-education course she is following.

Lotte: Yes. Because my first impression of her was that she was really good at listening. And of course she said the things you should and, completely understandably, that I shouldn’t just laze around or anything. But it was the following conversations, where she had changed her tone, and started asked about things which ... well, even though I live together with my boyfriend, then it is, what should I say, limited how much his life necessarily should be mixed up in it. Where I think that it’s ... you can’t ask about these things, or just assess, without knowing the situation, that he should be the one to take a day off work, and we should find someone to babysit our daughter and so on ... it was a bit ... that feeling that someone was trying to control a bit too much on my behalf, also compared to what I perhaps think you do within that system.

Interviewer: Was that also based on your own experience of it in the first place? That you didn’t think she ought to behave like that?

Lotte: Yes. Also based on what I have been told, that their job is to help you get started, and there are these options, and if you are on sick leave then you are exempted from certain activities. I knew how things worked. So it was like ... I couldn’t understand that suddenly I was being asked things which previously, I think, have not been relevant at all, and if you don’t want to share ... For example with the course I am following now, he has been like, it is okay if I don’t want to share about how it was earlier. There are some boundaries that are much clearer. And I couldn’t understand why they were not being respected here. It just felt very unprofessional. And I also talked to my boyfriend about it, whether it was just me being a bit too sensitive, but he also thought it sounded very wrong, some of the things she was asking about. Not part of her job, if you will.

Interviewer: So how did you react in those situations?

Lotte: Well, the first time ... I actually was just looking forward to hearing from her, because she seemed very nice. But then I just felt I was being yelled at ... she accused me of not having been to [course] at all, and couldn’t understand or accept that we couldn’t get our daughter looked after. And I almost couldn’t get a word in, and when I finally got to say something, it was like she didn’t want to take it in. And didn’t listen to what I said. So I had to, what felt to me like, toughen up a bit, to say, well it is not true, that I haven’t been going, and it is like

this, I have to take care of my daughter when she is ill. That's too bad, but that's just a fact. It would have been the same if I had a job. So for me it was like I had to step up a bit more than I have done before. And I thought that was very unnecessary (Lotte, ID11-INT01).

Lotte's account above provides an illustrative description of the experience of a caseworker transgressing social norms. While the young people are clearly guided by social norms and expectations for their own behaviour, Lotte's account shows how they also hold expectations about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour for the caseworkers. As Lotte says, she finds the caseworker's behaviour unacceptable, 'compared to what I perhaps think you do within that system'. Lotte's experience is that the caseworker oversteps her mandate when she starts interfering in her private life, by suggesting that perhaps Lotte's boyfriend should take care of their child when she is sick.

There are other cases of this kind of boundary drawing in the data, including the case described above, where a caseworker mentions that someone ought to move in order to pay less rent, and two instances of people feeling pressured to accept jobs or job placements which are not in keeping with the agreements they have made with their caseworkers. These instances show how the young people, while prone to following along with what they perceive to be expected of them, will protest when they perceive caseworkers as not living up to the social norms of the relationship.

To summarise, I have identified several different obligations the young people perceive they have to provide in return for benefits, in order to be 'good citizens', and demonstrate that they are worthy of support: to accept the offers you get from the Jobcentre; to not complain or refuse to participate in offers; and to show yourself to be active and motivated to make progress towards education or work.

The implications of these norms of deservingness are very similar: they produce an internalised pressure to be active and agree to participate in the activities offered by caseworkers. These norms are powerful drivers of the young people's actions, because to be seen as non-deserving is both stigmatising and involves a risk of material deprivation. However, in-so-far as they result in introjected forms of motivation for participating in activities, they have negative implications for the young people's wellbeing.

I provide a more in-depth analysis of the young people's motivation for participating in job placements in Chapter 8, where I show that as a result of the way caseworkers engage people in dialogue, autonomous forms of motivation are most common, and that this ameliorates the potential negative effects of the strong norms of deservingness.

7.4.3. A temporal relationship

Relationships usually change over time, and this is also true for the relationships between the young people and caseworkers. Although the cross-sectional difference between caseworkers is more pronounced, the interviews also point to some interesting aspects of how these relationships change over time. First of all, almost all of the interviewees described having negative feelings when they first applied for benefits.

Interviewer: You said you were very nervous before applying for benefits? Was that because of what you mentioned about not knowing whether you would be sent into activation and such?

Ida: Yes, yes, I think it was. And also that it was new people, generally, that was anxiety provoking. It still is, but not in the same way. So it is this thing about having to go in front of a person who kind of has to assess you, and what you will be allowed, and what you cannot be allowed. It felt like an exam in a way, because it feels like they have a lot of power when you are in that situation. And there is a shame attached as well. Now I would say that you shouldn't feel ashamed of getting in a situation where you need help, right? But there was an enormous amount of shame associated with not being able to complete this education, and having to get on benefits, you know? So it was a mess of all kinds of negative feelings (Ida, ID07-INT01).

In this interview excerpt, Ida recounts her feelings about applying for benefits for the first time, about a year prior to the interview. She describes feelings that are typical for the interviewees when they recount their situation upon first applying for benefits. They generally find the situation daunting and difficult, partly because most are struggling with mental illness such as anxiety and depression. They are experiencing a new and unfamiliar situation, unsure about their own position, their rights, and duties. They are experiencing a lot of shame associated with having to apply for benefits and being in a position where they are dependent on help from the municipality.

The combination of these factors puts them in a very vulnerable situation, which is further exacerbated when meeting caseworkers who have the power to decide what will happen to them. They consequently have a natural tendency towards accepting everything the caseworkers suggest in the beginning, meaning that there is a higher risk of introjected motivation, and therefore also of engaging in activities which are not good for their wellbeing. Another way of understanding this is to say that they tend to prioritise their need for relatedness with caseworkers over their need for autonomy in this situation.

As Ida touches upon in the above excerpt, many of these factors can change over time. She describes having now come to understand and accept for herself that it is okay to need help, and that she does not have to feel shame.

As we shall see in the next chapter, most people also improve their mental health over time, they develop a better understanding of the system and caseworkers' expectations, and they often also develop more trust in their caseworkers over time. This is an indication that, in most cases, it is not caseworkers' approaches to the meetings with the young people that increases feelings of stigmatisation and shame, for instance by questioning the young people's deservingness.

Instead, caseworkers and course providers support the young people to develop more inclusive norms of behaviour, meaning that they do not feel shame to the same extent as they did when first entering the benefits system. In general, the relationship with the caseworker tends to decrease, rather than increase, the young person's sense of shame.

This all means that after they have been in the system for a while, people feel better able to set limits and voice their preferences and needs. An example of this comes from Sia, who did not feel a good connection with her caseworker, and was able to insist that she needed to change to another caseworker.

Sia: It was an incredible difficult conversation to have. She was ... I don't know. She seemed very sceptical from the very first sentence I said, as if she didn't quite believe me and if ... she literally said to me: 'that is not a good enough reason to change caseworkers'. And then I think I became a little frustrated, and probably started talking a bit hard at her, and then at the end she was like, 'okay, you will get another one'. But I really had to step up and be like 'now I don't feel that you are hearing what I am telling you'. Yes, so it wasn't cool, but luckily it worked, but I had to fight for it.

Interviewer: I assume not everybody knows that you can request a new caseworker. How do you know about it? And do you know if there are any criteria for ... when is it legitimate to request a new caseworker?

Sia: I believe it says so in our ... when we get the benefit approved. It says there that we have a right to it. It is not something I have ... It is a long time ago I got it, and not something that has been relevant. I think it was [course employee] who told me, and then I think also [course manager] then mentioned it. So it has been the advisors at the school. Yes, I think it was [course employee] who said to me first that perhaps I should consider changing. Try to talk to her at first, and if that didn't work then change. Or request to change. He said that you have a right to that as a citizen. But it is not something they advertise widely. It was a little difficult to find out (Sia, ID09-INT02).

In Sia's case, what made her aware that she had the right to request another caseworker, and the confidence to stand firm and insist on her right, was the

support of employees at the course she was attending. During her time attending a psycho-education course, she has gained the sense of competence necessary to stand up for herself and insist on her rights, even in the face of a lot of resistance from the Jobcentre manager.

This is very different from her description of her first meeting at the Jobcentre, where she was unable to make herself understood and was initially turned away and told to get a job. At that time, she did not understand the situation and her rights at all, and was unable to effectively communicate her needs without the help of another person joining the meeting.

As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, with the right interventions, the young people are able to go through a process of increasing self-awareness, which enables them to better understand and explain what their needs are. This is an important element of satisfying the need for autonomy.

Another temporal aspect of the relationship, which does not appear in all of the cases, but was mentioned by a few people, is that caseworkers can tend to become less patient over time.

Interviewer: So they were actually quite flexible about it? It sounds like, the way you describe it, like there is a certain expectation to start attending more days gradually, but that they are also aware of not pushing too much?

Julie: Yes, I think it was a lot like that. They were pushing quite a lot for me to do it, and then when I did that and didn't make it, they were fine with it. It was a lot like that it worked. 'You have to do it. We believe you can, so you should do it'. And then I did it for a day or two, and then I couldn't after all and then they were a little like, 'oh well, then we will call you in a month and tell you to try again'.

Interviewer: Was that from [course] or was it from the Jobcentre? That there was this expectation or pressure?

Julie: Ehm, that was mostly from the Jobcentre. But there were also a lot of changes. I have changed caseworkers a lot. So, when you changed caseworkers, they weren't like that to begin with. Some time would pass, and then they pushed a bit, and then I couldn't handle it. And then you changed caseworkers anyway, then the next one had to get a handle on things. So I don't know how much was because they were being nice, and how much was that they didn't understand anything. But it was fine with me in any case (Julie, ID18-INT01).

As Julie describes here, and as mentioned in the previous section, there is a clear expectation that the young people make progress over time. If this does not happen, caseworkers are likely to try to push the young people to try other activities or make more of an effort. Even though there is a case file with reports on previous activities, some of the young people still perceive that new caseworkers have a tendency to 'reset' the relationship, so that they are more

patient in the beginning, and then grow less patient and more controlling over time if they do not perceive any progress. This is what Julie describes here, based on her long history on benefits with many different caseworkers.

7.5. Implications of caseworker encounters for wellbeing and motivation

In the previous sections, I described why the caseworker relationship is important for the young people, and what produces positive or negative experiences respectively. In this final section, I now turn to the question of what the implications of these experiences are for the wellbeing of the young people.

7.5.1. Supporting relatedness

Recall the previous description of relatedness-supportive techniques in Chapter 3. According to SDT research, different ways to support relatedness in interpersonal relations include, first, showing unconditional positive regard. In other words, showing that you value the other person, regardless of how they perform, and avoiding statements that can be perceived as blaming or judgmental.

Second, taking an interest in the other person by showing genuine curiosity and concern for people's thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. Third, acknowledging and accepting conflict. Fourth, being honest, authentic, and transparent and sharing perceptions and experiences in a way that shows engagement in the situation, without imposing one's own views on the client.

In general, relatedness-supporting measures overlap with autonomy-supporting measures, because "relatedness satisfactions derive from the sense that another supports the person's self" (Ryan & Deci, p. 448). As mentioned above, a negative encounter can have a direct negative impact on wellbeing, because of the intrinsic importance of relatedness as a basic psychological need. A negative experience with a controlling caseworker may also undermine the sense of autonomy, resulting in an indirect negative impact on wellbeing, but the experience itself can also have such an impact directly.

Interviewer: Were you at any point actually afraid that she would reduce your benefit because of this thing with sick leaves and so on?

Lotte: No, but that was mainly because I knew that I was in compliance with the law. I was more afraid that it would be a very unpleasant experience if I had to have a physical meeting with her prior to starting on the study. So it was actually more that aspect of it. Especially when I had a bit, what should I say, I don't have

social anxiety, but it was just a bit more transgressive⁶ for me with those kind of situations because I was so sad. So it was actually more that fear of having to have a physical meeting with her before I stopped. Because I have had those unpleasant conversations (Lotte, ID11-INT01).

Lotte's account above shows how important the positive relationship with caseworkers is, and how a negative encounter has negative implications for wellbeing. Even though Lotte is not afraid of being sanctioned, the experience of a negative encounter with her caseworkers is sufficient to cause a lot of anxiety, not because of the potential consequences, but simply because the negative encounter is such an unpleasant experience in itself.

Based on the above characterisations of positive and negative caseworker experiences, we can derive some of the aspects of the encounters that support or thwart the basic psychological need for relatedness – in this case conceptualised as the need to feel understood and respected by caseworkers. These experiences align very well with the theoretical propositions described in Chapter 3.

First of all, caseworkers can support relatedness by focusing on the personal relationship, rather than only focusing on tasks such as organising activation or making progress towards work or education. This means for example checking in on people to hear how they are doing or simply showing an interest in people's wellbeing. This shows that they value the young people as human beings, not just as a 'number'.

Second, caseworkers can show that they know and understand the young people, by for example showing that they remember them and what they talked about previously, and by empathising with their challenges. Third, caseworkers can support the need for relatedness by practising active listening and making eye contact.

⁶ A note on translation is perhaps in order here: the word 'transgressive' is used here (and other places) as a translation of the Danish 'grænseoverskridende'. 'Transgressive' is defined in English dictionaries as 'violating or challenging socially accepted standards of behaviour, belief, morality, or taste'. In comparison, the Danish expression 'grænseoverskridende' is more attached to the individual person than to social values as such, most commonly used to describe a sense of having one's personal boundaries overstepped. The English term 'transgressive' is often used as a positive characterisation, e.g. it may be positive for a piece of art to be transgressive. On the contrary, the Danish 'grænseoverskridende' is usually used to describe a negative personal experience.

7.5.2. Supporting autonomy

As described in the theory chapter, autonomy-support is first of all about showing unconditional regard and a desire for the empowerment and self-actualisation of the client: “at its most foundational level, autonomy support begins by embracing the perspective of the client” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 443). As such, caseworker behaviour which is experienced as supporting relatedness is also likely to be experienced as supporting the need for autonomy.

The empirical findings described in the previous sections match very closely the theoretical predictions made by SDT about support for autonomy. For example, based on research on therapist-client relationships, SDT emphasises the need to embrace the client’s perspective rather than the therapist seeking to press their own viewpoints. This describes very well the experiences that the young people have of caseworkers. Active listening is therefore not only important for supporting relatedness, but also for supporting people’s sense of autonomy. Caseworkers who support autonomy are those who focus more on understanding the young people’s perspectives and less on providing advice.

When considering the extent to which caseworkers support autonomy, it is particularly relevant to examine decision-making processes. My interviews contain many in-depth discussions with the young people about decision-making processes, where I have tried to uncover to what extent they felt that they were able to make decisions for themselves, and to what extent they felt that the decisions made were in their best interest.

According to SDT, we would expect these processes to support feelings of autonomy when caseworkers listen empathically to the young people’s preferences, provide a meaningful rationale for activities, create an atmosphere which encourages questions and discussion, acknowledge feelings of resistance, provide choices, invite meaningful inputs, and avoid use of external rewards and incentives to promote behaviours.

When talking about the way decisions about activities are made, most of the young people describe it as a dialogue. They generally do not feel pressured to do something which they do not want to do, but feel that their need for autonomy is respected by caseworkers who listen to their preferences and try their best to find activities which are aligned with them.

However, as is apparent from the previous section, this is a matter of degree: the caseworkers that are most supportive of autonomy are those who support the young people’s own suggestions, while others are more prone to seek to direct behaviour. The following excerpts represent these different experiences, from most to least supportive of autonomy.

Interviewer: Did you talk to your caseworker about your thoughts about exiting benefits and start working instead? Or was that something you just considered and decided on your own?

Michael: I talked to her about it, and have been very open about that I didn't feel I knew what to do with regards to education. If I wanted to start education at all. So that was also why she got me in to [course] on the job search line and such.

Interviewer: And what have your conversations been about? Has she suggested something or provided any guidance in relation to what the best way to go about it would be?

Michael: She was very involved, she suggested [course], so she has been very involved in that period. But when I started talking about exiting benefits, she raised the same concern that you expressed, that I should consider that there is no safety net then. And if I needed to get registered again that takes a bit of time. All that. It felt like she had my worries in her head as well. That it wasn't just the municipality's, or ... yes.

Interviewer: So you didn't feel that she was in a hurry to get you out the door?

Michael: No, it was actually like, when I finally made the decision... I don't think she would have chosen to sign me out at that time, if it had been up to her.

Interviewer: So it was completely your own decision?

Michael: Yes, I feel that it was (Michael, ID08-INT04).

In this excerpt, Michael talks about the process of deciding to exit benefits, after several years of unemployment, and recovering from dropping out of his university education as a result of stress and depression.

He describes how his caseworker listened to his needs and preferences and supported his wishes, firstly by signing him up for a job search course, when he expressed a wish to start working, rather than starting education (even though the official policy is to prioritise first getting people to complete an education).

At no time did Michael feel that he was being pressured to exit benefits before he felt ready to do so. On the contrary, his impression is that his caseworker would have preferred him to stay on benefits a bit longer, until he had found more secure employment (at the time he was working part-time warehouse jobs as a temp.). The result is that Michael felt that he had complete ownership of the decision to exit benefit.

Less supportive of autonomy are those who have their own ideas about what the most appropriate activities would be, and seek to persuade the young people to agree.

Pelle: I was perhaps a little slow to understand what it was we were talking about in that last conversation in October. She asked very leading questions about how I was doing. And I happened to say that I was doing quite well, and I thought I was more or less ready to start working and things like that. So I had already said that I was doing really well. And perhaps I am the kind of person who, when I am doing a little better, maybe I happen to say that it is going really well. And then she could put pressure on me, 'but you said right before that you were actually ready to start working, yet you would still like to continue at the course?' So she got it done in a way where I didn't have so many arguments to stand on.

Interviewer: So you did not feel that you were the one in control of that conversation?

Pelle: I don't feel that I have ever really been. I am asked about how I feel on a scale from zero to ten about 'x' and depending on how I answer I am assigned something. Of course there is a kind of, 'what do you think about that, and isn't that a good idea?' But it is presented in a way where you don't really have a choice, and you probably just have to say yes here. Now it wasn't completely out there, or completely crazy, that I had to go down to [course], so it wasn't like I had anything against it as such. But you can feel that they are the ones controlling the conversation (Pelle, UB02-INT02).

As Pelle describes in this excerpt, he does not feel that he is able to make decisions for himself about which activities he wants to participate in. He would have preferred to continue at the course he had been attending for a while, but his caseworker was of the opinion that there had not been sufficient progress, and therefore wanted to move him to another course provider more focused on job searching. Pelle did not feel that he was able to say no to this, and hence he did not feel in control of the situation. On the other hand, he did not experience this as exactly being forced to do something he was not interested in, as the other course provider is also an acceptable option for him.

Least supportive of autonomy are those who demand that the young people participate in specific activities, even though they are unable to make sense of it. The following excerpt from an interview with Jack is illustrative of how these processes work in cases where the young people experience a lack of trust in caseworkers. Here, he has just described doing a job placement that he had no interest in doing – and actually having had to phone in ill as a result of experiencing a panic attack on his way to the job placement.

Interviewer: But could you not have said no to doing it?

Jack: I don't think so. I think not, because ... perhaps if there had been some breaks, I could have said, 'oh no, I don't feel good about this, so I can't, I don't know if I can work there'. Maybe I could have done something, you know,

disrupt, delay, you know, those things. Said things. But again, I would like to stay within the boundaries, I would like to do as one should (Jack, ID05-INT01).

Here, Jack explains why he did not protest against doing a job placement that he had no interest in doing. His explanation is in part about the way he experienced the meeting with the caseworker, where the decision was made – that he did not feel that there was a place in the conversation for him to say anything. But the main explanation seems to be that he wanted to comply with expectations in order to stay on the caseworker's good side. As discussed above, he perceives saying yes to offers as important for staying within the boundaries of the prevailing social norms.

Although most of the young people experience better relationships with their caseworkers than Jack, and therefore also experience having more of a say in the decision-making process, his explanation is typical for the cases where people agree to participate in activities even though they do not have any interest in them. As explained already in the previous chapter, this is an example of how the systemic power imbalance and expectations in the system contribute to restricting citizens' agency and causes feelings of disempowerment and frustration.

It also shows how the ability to say no is tied to the quality of the relationship with the caseworkers: saying no requires a certain level of trust that the caseworker will receive it well and will not get mad and somehow punish the client. Rather than simply saying no – which would be the most autonomous thing to do – young people prefer to come up with some kind of way of rationalising their participation in activities.

7.5.3. Supporting competence

Competence-supporting techniques according to SDT include: identifying barriers and obstacles; providing optimal challenges; offering rich, clear, and relevant feedback; and providing structure to people's choices (e.g. through recommendations or plans).

As described in Chapter 3, in supporting people's sense of competence it is important that they are provided with challenges that they can succeed in most of the time, combined with occasional challenges that push the boundaries of their skill level. Finding the right balance can be a challenge for caseworkers, as also noted by Nielsen and Monrad (2023), in that there can be a moral dilemma between not pushing vulnerable people too hard, and helping them build their competence by pushing them to move outside of their comfort zone.

However, based on the experiences of my interviewees, the young people are already inclined to push themselves, and hence caseworkers can easily,

unintentionally, push too hard, with the risk that vulnerable young people experience failure, and therefore a decreased sense of competence.

Overall, the young people's experiences of caseworker encounters provide less information relating to competence than to the two other basic needs. There are some experiences of the provision of positive feedback, but these are mainly with the frontline workers at course providers who have closer relationships with the young people.

It is about checking with me once a month where I am with my plan and what has happened with the latest things, you know. So he checks up on me, for example if I say 'I need medicine so I can start studying', then he checks with me like, 'did you talk to the psychiatrist?' and 'what's up'? So he both takes me up on it and supports me, and makes sure that I have a good feeling about attending the school. Where, in the beginning, we had some run-ins, where he thought – because my mood varies a lot, because I have ADHD, and some days I am way down and don't have the energy to talk to anybody, and other days I talk to everybody at school – so he thought I wasn't talking it seriously.

And because I don't often talk about these issues I have inside me, and the emotions I have, I could see how it might look from his point of view. And then it all just came out all at once and I told him, 'I don't think it's ok that you pressure me like that, because these things are difficult for me, even if I don't express it'. And he apologised, and I apologised, and he says that he has learned a lot about how people with ADHD are feeling. And I think that's really great, not because I have to dunk on people for not knowing how it is to have ADHD, but just that he ... that he believes what I tell him, and that I have a reason for saying what I say. So I know that he respects me, and I respect him.

And I know that I probably wouldn't be able to move on if I didn't have him, because he was very good at supporting me. Just by saying that I am doing well, and recognising that when I get to school, even if I am late, that it has been difficult for me to get going, and that he is happy that I am there. Where, in the beginning, he, and most of the teachers, they had some kind of sarcastic comment about being late, because they thought I was just slacking or whatever. Which I understand. I think a normal person would perhaps also have ulterior motives. So I think that people often find it difficult to understand what my motives are, how I work, based on how I act. But ... the teachers at [course] are some of the best teachers I have ever met, and it's some of the best teacher-student relations I have experienced. For sure (Bo, ID17-INT01).

In this excerpt, Bo describes almost a text-book example of a relationship with an employee at a course provider who supports his sense of competence. The teacher follows up on Bo's plans and provides positive feedback. Bo, in a very illustrative way, contrasts the teacher's initial response to his behaviour with his attitude at present in a manner which confirms the insight from SDT that

feedback should be about the behaviour and not the person, and that failures should be treated informationally rather than evaluatively.

The teacher's initial behaviour is an example of treating Bo's lack of ability to show up on time and engage in the course evaluatively, as indicative of a lack of motivation and willingness to engage, which is then sanctioned with sarcastic comments and increased pressure to conform to demands.

However, this changed after Bo protested. The teacher was able to approach the conflict with Bo as a chance to learn more about his needs and behaviour, after which he started treating Bo's failure to show up on time as a source of information on Bo's current wellbeing, rather than as a way to evaluate his willingness to cooperate. This in turn enabled the teacher to support Bo's sense of competence through positive feedback and encouragement, rather than undermining it by providing negative feedback and increasing control.

7.5.4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I described three different types of caseworker experiences: the caring caseworker, the indifferent caseworker, and the controlling caseworker. As summarised in Table 3, these different caseworker experiences are produced by specific aspects of the way caseworkers act and communicate in the encounters with the young people. These different caseworker experiences in turn have different implications for the young people's wellbeing. Caseworkers can support relatedness by showing that they care about the young people's wellbeing. They can support autonomy by practising active listening and supporting the young people's own preferences. They can support competence by providing positive feedback.

Similarly to the analysis in Chapter 6, and as described in general terms in Chapter 4, the causal links between the first and second columns in Table 13 are produced by interviewees in cooperation with me as a researcher, in the interview situation. The link between column two and three, associating interviewee experiences with the basic psychological needs is made analytically by me as a researcher, drawing on the theoretical propositions of the SDT framework.

Table 13: Implications of caseworker encounters for basic psychological needs

Experience	Produced by	Associated with
The caring caseworker	Checking in to inquire about wellbeing	Support for autonomy
	Focusing on relations rather than tasks	Support for relatedness
	Focusing on wellbeing rather than progress towards education or work	
	Practising active listening	
	Supporting young people's own preferences and suggestions	
	Providing positive feedback and encouragement	
The indifferent caseworker	Not listening	Limited support for autonomy
	Not interested in understanding needs	Limited support for relatedness
	Passive	Anger and frustration
	Focusing on completing tasks	
	Lack of empathy	
The controlling caseworker	Not listening	Thwarting needs for autonomy and relatedness
	Focusing on controlling compliance with conditionalities	Anger and frustration
	Prescriptive, focusing on providing suggestions	
	Pressuring to make progress towards education and work	

7.6. Discussion: frontline worker support for basic psychological needs in the Danish welfare conditionality regime

In this chapter, I have argued that the relationship between caseworkers and the young people is central for understanding how active labour market policies affect wellbeing. The young people themselves experience the relationship with caseworkers as important for several reasons: first, since most of the young people struggle with mental health issues, which are very personal and sensitive, they need to feel that they know and can trust their caseworkers in order to feel comfortable opening up about how their needs and preferences.

Second, the young people rely on good relations with their caseworkers to find out what demands they have to comply with in order to keep receiving benefits and to get the support they need. Since it is often not very clear to them what kind of demands they have to comply with, and since caseworkers have a lot of discretion and decision-making power, they need to be able to openly discuss with caseworkers whether they are living up to the behaviours expected of them.

The importance of the relationship with caseworkers has been highlighted in previous studies as well (M. L. Andersen, 2020; Caswell & Larsen, 2020; Dall & Jørgensen, 2022; Danneris & Caswell, 2019; Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Eskelinen & Olesen, 2010). For example, Eskelinen and Olesen (2010) describe how a good relationship is not just important for people to get the right support, but also because it protects them from harmful treatment, such as for example being pushed to participate in activities which are beyond their abilities.

In the following discussion, I highlight three particularly important topics, and explain how my findings contribute to the existing literature. First, the question of whether caseworkers can support citizen agency, and by extension wellbeing, despite working within a welfare conditionality regime. Second, the significance of the fact that the young people perceive demands as unclear. Third, the implications of social norms of deservingness.

7.6.1. Can caseworkers support wellbeing in a welfare conditionality regime?

As described above, it is important for the young people to feel that they can trust their caseworkers. However, this is sometimes made difficult by the fact that meetings are relatively infrequent and short, that the young people encounter many different frontline workers, that there are often changes in who their contact persons are, and that caseworker changes are not always handled in ways which take the relationship seriously. These findings are similar to other studies from the Danish context, which have found that some degree of user involvement is possible if a trusting relationship is created, but that there are often barriers to achieving this (Caswell & Larsen, 2020).

Looking across the existing studies of caseworker-citizen encounters in the Danish context, there is variety in how optimistic the authors are about the possibility of supporting citizen agency within the Danish welfare conditionality regime. Some studies describe how people go through a process of ‘clientisation’, where they are socialised into doing what frontline workers expect of them, and how new public management ways of working make it very difficult for caseworkers to involve citizens in decision making (Andersen, 2020; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003).

As described in this chapter, my interviews revealed more positive than negative experiences. However, I have also described the limitations introduced by the conditionality system, and outlined characteristics of both positive and negative caseworker experiences. The positive cases show that some degree of support for autonomy and competence is possible in the Danish system, but that it is far from a given that it will happen. What is more interesting

in a broader perspective is not to discuss whether positive or negative experiences are more prevalent, but to outline the mechanisms behind these experiences.

It is possible to establish a general synthesis of the existing literature, which is closely aligned with my own findings and the propositions of the SDT framework about how caseworkers may support basic psychological needs. First, even within the Danish welfare conditionality system, caseworkers can support citizen experiences of competence (empowerment or agency) by engaging in dialogue, by showing support for people's own perspectives on their lives (Andersen, 2020; Djuve & Kavli, 2015), and by providing people with choices (Danneris & Caswell, 2019).

Second, it is important that citizens experience being met with respect (Andersen, 2020). This includes what Baadsgaard et al. (2014, p. 181) call 'presencing', meaning that caseworkers are present in the conversation and are sufficiently empathetic to be able to sense the citizen's issues ('sensing'). Another relevant concept to describe what being met with respect means in practice is that of 'catching' the citizen's initiative. Based on observational data, Caswell & Larsen (2020) describe how caseworkers often miss citizens' descriptions of their wishes, and instead reply based on 'system' needs or their own thoughts about what is meaningful. This is partly because citizens often formulate their wishes in very implicit and hesitant ways, and partly because of the challenge of aligning citizen preferences with system requirements (Dall & Jørgensen, 2022).

In this chapter, I have described the reasons why young people are often hesitant to formulate their own wishes and how it is experienced when caseworkers either manage to 'catch' their initiatives (the caring caseworker), ignore their wishes (the indifferent caseworker), or emphasise their own ideas about what should happen (the controlling caseworker).

Eskelinen and Olesen (2010) describe findings very similar to the experiences of my interviewees, in their description of cases where the relationship with caseworkers is experienced as disempowering and alienating, and interventions are perceived as being based on system needs, rather than citizen needs. Similar to my findings, the authors point out that caseworker contact can be perceived as either controlling or supporting depending on how it is carried out, and how it fits with citizen needs at a given point in time.

Many of the experiences described by the young people have also been described from the perspective of caseworkers, including the importance of establishing a personal relationship with citizens rather than playing a purely professional role, to "throw away the Jobcenter lady and try to just be a human being in front of a human being" (Nielsen & Monrad, 2023). The study by Nielsen and Monrad (2023) shows how caseworkers are often well aware of how

they are perceived by citizens, with one person for example describing how citizens can sense right away if they are playing a professional role rather than being present as their authentic self – something which is clearly supported by the experiences of my interviewees.

To sum up, even if there are system-related challenges for caseworkers in supporting citizen wellbeing, caseworkers do in fact have sufficient discretion in the Danish system to act in ways which support benefit recipients' basic psychological needs. The mechanisms outlined above which link the citizen-caseworker relationship with basic psychological needs are supported by both the citizen perspective, the caseworker perspective, and by researchers' analyses of observations of citizen-caseworker encounters.

7.6.2. Discretion and the fuzziness of demands

The nature of the relationship between citizens and caseworkers as personal is one of the key characteristics described above. Rather than a relationship governed by rules and regulations, the young people describe relationships as being governed primarily by perceived norms and expectations about what the correct behaviour is. This is surprising insofar as Danish ALMPs are on paper dominated by new public management governance and detailed process regulations.

However, based on interviewee experiences, it seems that there is in practice sufficient flexibility to allow frontline workers a high degree of discretion, including opportunities for developing relationships that are not solely governed by rules. As such, these experiences support the basic proposition of street level bureaucracy theory of the need to go beyond rules and regulations to understand the citizen-caseworker encounter (Lipsky, 1980). This has been extensively explored from the frontline worker perspective in the street-level bureaucracy literature (Harrits, 2016; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023). Here I have examined how this is experienced from the citizen perspective, and what the implications are for citizen wellbeing.

The point of emphasising the importance of the relationship as personal rather than rules-based is that this has implications for how caseworker encounters affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. On the one hand, the high level of discretion, and the way caseworkers emphasise the personal aspects of the relationship, is what allows them to support wellbeing in the ways described in the previous section. Without discretion, they would not have the flexibility to involve citizens in decision making or shape interventions based on citizen preferences and needs.

One implication of this de-emphasising of rules and regulations is that demands are often talked about in very 'fuzzy' ways by caseworkers (Caswell & Dall, 2022), something which is also experienced by the young people. In the

experiences of my interviewees, the main kind of lack of clarity is whether an activity being discussed, for example a job placement, is actually a demand or just a suggestion. Another frequently mentioned form of lack of clarity is what it means to make sufficient progress. There is a clear expectation of progress, but it is not clear when sufficient progress has been made, and in fact this is negotiable. This lack of clarity can be seen as a strategy by caseworkers for maintaining the system's need of focusing on labour market participation and education, while at the same time not pushing vulnerable young people to participate in activities that they are not ready for (Caswell & Dall, 2022). As such, it may also be seen as a strategy employed by caseworkers for coping with the demands of the system in ways that do not harm vulnerable citizens.

However, the lack of clarity in itself may have negative implications for the young people's wellbeing. First, agency is restricted when one does not have sufficient information to clearly assess the consequences of one's actions. Second, the lack of clear expectations and rules may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, as the young people may never feel that they have done enough to deserve the support they get. This association of a general lack of clear-cut rules in modern society with feelings of inadequacy has been proposed as a potential cause of widespread anxiety among young people (Hjortkjær, 2020).

There seems, then, to be a real dilemma here: on the one hand, the young people clearly prefer the personal relationship to a more rule-based one. But when caseworkers take on the role of citizen agents, and place themselves outside the system, the system requirements are not clearly articulated in meetings. This in turn means that it is not clear to citizens what requirements they need to comply with, which can be a source of uncertainty and anxiety.

7.6.3. The implications of social norms and expectations for frontline worker encounters and citizen wellbeing

In the analysis above, I have highlighted the importance of norms of reciprocity as a central organising principle of ALMPs in the Danish context. The young people experience the relations with caseworkers as requiring that both parties invest something in the relationship. Interviewees often express uncertainty about what they are required to provide, but generally perceive a requirement to show that they are motivated to try their best to make progress towards employment or education. They do this by accepting the activities they are offered by caseworkers and by for example increasing the number of hours they are attending courses, or by participating in job placements.

The principle of reciprocity has been previously analysed in particular by anthropologists as part of 'Gift Relationship Theory' (Ashworth, 2013;

Schwartz, 1967). The ‘gift relationship’ is an important concept for understanding how people relate to each other outside of the market and the state. It is central to the appreciation of concepts such as trust, reciprocity, and solidarity. The gift relationship means that people act based on norms of obligation and reciprocity, rather than based purely on self-interest, as assumed by rational choice theories.

In his classic study of blood donation, Titmuss (2018, p. 55) emphasised the significance of “the reality of the obligation or compulsion to give. In all that Mauss, Levi-Strauss, Homans, Schwartz and others have written on gift-exchange, there emerges a vivid sense of the immense pervasiveness of the social obligation – the group compulsion – to give and to repay, and the strength of the supporting sanctions: dishonor, shame and guilt.” This anthropological work therefore underscores the strength of the norm of reciprocity, which is also strongly present in the experiences of my interviewees. And in fact, the early anthropologists such as Mauss already sketched out how these principles could be applied to understanding the rise of social security in France and Britain (Titmuss, 2018, p. 56). Similarly, Boland and Griffin (2016) discusses how Mauss’ ideas of the gift relationship can be used to understand what benefit recipients in Ireland have to ‘give’ in return for their benefits.

Another concept that may be fruitful for understanding the norms and expectations at play is that of ‘deservingness’. In his seminal paper on the topic, Van Ooschot (2000) identified five central criteria used by people to assess someone’s deservingness of public support: a) control over neediness; b) level of need; c) closeness in identity; d) attitude; and e) reciprocity. The experiences described in this chapter suggest that at least three of these are relevant for understanding the young people’s worries about being seen as undeserving of support, and their strategies for mitigating this risk.

First, the criteria of ‘control over neediness’. By complying with expectations, interviewees aim to show that they are motivated to make progress towards work and education, and ultimately exiting benefits. This can be seen as a strategy for mitigating the risk of being seen as a ‘scrounger’, i.e. as someone who intentionally chooses to stay on benefits because they are lazy and do not want to contribute to society by working (and hence can be held responsible for their situation of need, and is therefore considered undeserving of support).

Second, the criteria of ‘attitude’. According to Van Oorschot (2000, p. 26), people who are considered likeable, grateful, compliant, and conforming to our standards are likely to be considered more deserving. The act of accepting offers is the young people’s main means of showing that they are grateful and compliant, and hence deserving of support.

Third, the criteria of reciprocity: people who are seen to have contributed to society, or seen as being able to contribute in the future, are perceived as more deserving of support. In particular, the young people want to demonstrate that they are highly motivated to make progress, and that there is therefore likely to be a ‘return on investment’ to society of the support they receive.

The governmentality perspective is relevant here for illuminating how power is exercised through strong norms of deservingness, including norms of ‘rights and duties’, being self-sufficient, and contributing to society through work. These norms do not seem to be constructed in the specific interactions between citizens and caseworkers, but rather express more general social norms, as also found by political scientists studying deservingness (Petersen, 2012). In addition, the norm of reciprocity is clearly articulated in the policies themselves, through the central principle of ‘rights and duties’. This is a principle of reciprocity, where receiving benefits is accompanied by certain duties, most generally to be available to the labour market. What exactly is meant by being ‘available’ to the labour market is a topic of ongoing public debate, in particular when it comes to the groups of unemployed people who are facing challenges other than unemployment.

Previous studies of the experiences of young benefit recipients (in this case recipients of unemployment benefits in the social insurance system) have similarly highlighted the centrality of norms of deservingness. Since people have already contributed to social insurance, one might think that the deservingness issue would be already settled. However, the experiences between the two groups are in fact very similar, with young people in the social insurance system experiencing similar feelings of shame about not being able to support themselves, and feeling that they need to reciprocate their benefits by showing a high level of activity (Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021; Pultz, 2019). Eschweiler and Pultz (2021) links this explicitly to the activation paradigm that has dominated Danish ALMPs since the 1990s. Pultz (2019) describes the young people’s feelings of inadequacy as the experience of ‘motivation debt’ – related to the deservingness norms – the feeling that one has to demonstrate motivation to contribute to society in order to be deserving of support.

These norms of reciprocity and deservingness are clearly visible in most of the young people’s descriptions of their encounters with caseworkers. Their experiences show how wider social norms in society, which are also articulated as principles in the relevant legislation, are enacted in the interactions between the young people and caseworkers.

While the overall social norms of reciprocity and deservingness can be seen as both deeply grounded in human societies (Petersen, 2012; Titmuss, 2018) and as articulated through active labour market policies (Boland & Griffin, 2016; Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021), the more precise meaning of these norms

is subject to negotiations between caseworkers and citizens, and caseworkers use their discretion to implement the overall principles in very diverse ways.

As such, it is relevant to consider the interactionist emphasis on the complex negotiations that take place in the meetings between caseworkers and citizens (Baadsgaard, 2014, p. 9). To return to the case of Bo described earlier in the chapter, he went into negotiations with a team of frontline workers believing that he could trade his progress in a math course for what he wanted (transfer to another type of benefit). However, after the meeting he explained how he felt that he had to agree to participation in the rehabilitation course offered after all. He sensed that the frontline workers in the meeting would not take kindly to a rejection of participation in the course – something which he attributed to the fact that the course was a new initiative, with external funding, which they were keen to be able to showcase as a success. He therefore agreed to participate in the course, seeing this participation as something that he had to contribute in return for getting what he wanted.

As such, there is both a Foucauldian kind of disciplining taking place through social norms at the macro-level, as well as complex negotiations about what exactly should be provided in return for one's benefits through conversations at the micro-level (Baadsgaard et al. 2014, p. 167). Both perspectives are necessary to understand benefit recipients' experiences of encounters with caseworkers and how these experiences affect their wellbeing. From the SDT perspective, these perspectives show the complex balance between the wish to adhere to social norms, in order to meet the need for relatedness, and the needs for autonomy and competence.

The young people's experiences show the potential negative implications of norms of deservingness and reciprocity for wellbeing, since they risk making people pressure themselves to act in ways that are not in their own best interest. However, the above analysis also shows that the extent to which this is experienced as thwarting the need for autonomy depends on the specific encounter between the young people and caseworkers.

The case of Bo described above is a good example. He ends up accepting participating in a rehabilitation course that he has no interest in, out of fear that he will otherwise be considered a scrounger and not deserving of help. Bo has agency in the sense that he makes a conscious decision to accept to participate in the course, based on an assessment that this is what is expected of him, and that it is necessary in order to achieve what he wants. However, it is a very restricted agency, which does not allow him to act in the way that he would actually prefer, but is instead aimed at complying with perceived norms around deservingness. At the same time, as he has a strong relationship with his caseworker, he is able to make sense of the requirement to participate in the course.

7.7. Conclusion

This chapter has shown how important the relationship with caseworkers is for the young unemployed people. This is because: a) it has intrinsic value – a successful meeting and a relation with a person who is listening serves to fulfil the basic need for relatedness; b) a close relationship is necessary for people to feel comfortable opening up about sensitive and personal issues; c) the power that caseworkers have to make important decisions makes it important for the young people to be assured that caseworkers have their interest at heart; d) meetings with caseworkers are important for the young people to get a sense of what is expected of them.

The young people's experiences of caseworker encounters can be described as either caring, indifferent, or controlling. The experience of caseworkers as caring is associated with experiences of trust, involvement in decisions; feeling listened to, and feeling that the other person is present and is supporting ideas and showing an interest in one's wellbeing. It can be summarised as the experience of encountering a person who cares about you and trusts in your ability to make decisions. This creates a feeling of being important and being someone who deserves other people's respect and trust.

The experience of caseworkers as indifferent is linked primarily to a lack of support for relatedness. This is the feeling that there is no empathy, and that caseworkers are not really present and interested, which creates a feeling of not being recognised as a human being with equal value. Finally, controlling caseworkers undermine people's sense of autonomy by not listening to and supporting the young people's own experience of their needs, but rather making suggestions and placing demands based on their own beliefs about what is best to do.

SDT emphasises the need for autonomy and competence for wellbeing. This perspective is clearly relevant for an analysis of how benefit recipients' encounters with frontline workers affect wellbeing, in particular since there is a growing focus on the need to 'empower' unemployed citizens, i.e. improve their sense of agency or competence.

The focus on relatedness in SDT has come later, and still seems to receive less attention than the other basic needs. In addition, the theory is mainly based on relatedness in close relations, usually between two persons. This is also a relevant perspective for understanding relations between citizens and caseworkers. However, it is even more important to understand the role of social norms and expectations in guiding people's behaviour. Here, the SDT framework has less to say, and it is therefore fruitful to draw on other approaches, including governmentality, interactionist approaches, and theories

of reciprocity, gift relations, and deservingness, which all make valuable contributions to understanding the norms that guide behaviour in the field of ALMPs.

Where SDT makes a useful contribution is in linking these understandings of social processes to wellbeing, through the theory of internalisation. In particular, the concept of introjected motivation is useful, since it highlights how people may pressure themselves to comply with social norms that are in fact harmful to them. This chapter has shown how the young people perceive the norms of correct behaviour, how they attempt to comply with these norms, and how caseworker behaviour can help ensure that the young people do not pressure themselves to participate in activities that they are not ready for. In the next chapter, I explore this issue further, by looking at people's motivation for participating in job placements, and the implications of participation in courses and job placements for their wellbeing.

Chapter 8:

Interventions and trajectories over time

We have now considered the young people's experiences of two aspects of active labour market policies: the overall system or policy level, and the implementation processes. I now turn to the third aspect, the specific interventions, with a focus on the role of job placements and psychosocial support.

8.1. Introduction

As described earlier, ALMPs for the group of young people receiving Education Benefits comprise two main types of interventions: job placements and courses. Job placements in the Danish context are termed 'internships', and are provided for a maximum of four weeks at a time for those categorised as Education Ready, and 13 weeks for those categorised as Activity Ready, with the possibility of extension.

The category of courses covers many different types of education and training, including short job search courses, different kinds of informal skills training, psychosocial support, and physical education. Often course providers will provide a mix of these, although usually with emphasis on one aspect or another.

When it comes to interventions, the temporal aspect assumes greater prominence than has been the case so far. Most of the young people experience many changes in their wellbeing over time, both before and during the interview period, and different interventions can play an important role in either supporting or thwarting these changes. In the first section, I therefore present an analysis of the young people's trajectories over time, and demonstrate how different interventions interact with and influence these trajectories.

In the second section, I look specifically at the young people's experience of job placements. I use SDT's theory of motivation to analyse different types of motivation for participating in job placements and examine whether and how these are linked to the ways in which job placements affect the young people's wellbeing. Finally, I look at the role of courses providing psychosocial support in improving the young people's wellbeing over time. As in the other Chapters, I draw on the SDT framework throughout the analysis, considering the young people's experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

8.2. Trajectories into and out of benefits: temporal aspects of interactions between interventions and wellbeing

The temporal aspect of the young people's experience has so far played a secondary role in the analysis. While there are some temporal aspects to the young people's experiences of the overall context and the implementation processes, these are not necessarily the most pronounced patterns in the data.

However, when it comes to the experiences of interventions, the temporal aspect takes prominence. I therefore start this chapter with an analysis of the young people's trajectories from the moment they first applied for benefits and until my last contact with them. I focus on how the actions taken by the Jobcentre interact with other events in their lives to affect their wellbeing and motivation.

Recall from the description of SDT's motivation theory that motivation depends on feelings of autonomy and competence: we are motivated to act when we feel that our actions are aligned with our values and preferences and when we feel that we have the resources needed to achieve our goals. These feelings of autonomy and competence, and thereby also motivation, shift over time and this change is not necessarily linear. In order to understand how interventions interact with wellbeing and motivation, we have to understand the varying experiences of different people with different starting points at different points in time. In other words, we need to focus on understanding the temporal, processual dimensions of competence and autonomy.

It is important that interventions are tailored, not just to the needs of the individual, but to the needs of the individual at a certain time. As described by Neal (2021, p. 321), different threads of a process can be either synchronised in time or marked by dissonance. Whether there is synchronisation between young people's wellbeing and motivation and interventions or not, is likely to have significant implications for the effects of interventions.

If interventions are asynchronous with the young people's situation, there is a risk of 'lock-in' where 'the momentum for change dissipates' (Neale, 2021, p. 321). For example, caseworkers need to recognise and support young people in different ways when they feel the need for something to happen and when they feel the need for a period of reduced activity to recover e.g. from mental illness. These are particular, time-bound feelings that are not necessarily apparent without in-depth conversations with the young people themselves about their experience of their own situation.

In the following, I identify patterns in the young people's experiences over time. I use a matrix analysis with cases in the columns and experiences of interventions over time in the rows to identify different types of trajectories. Through the analysis, I develop four main types of trajectories. First, a few

people are able to enter and exit benefits within a relatively short period of time, finding either education or work without much need for support. I only have two of these cases among my interviewees. Second, some people experience a long period on benefits without making progress towards education or work. These individuals experience decreased competence because of repeated failures to achieve their objectives. I have three cases in the data set, which are best described as this type.

Third, a large group of cases are able to progressively improve their sense of competence and motivation over time, with many entering work or education. These cases are useful for gaining insights into what works well for supporting vulnerable young people to enter education or work.

Fourth, another large group of cases can be categorised as cases of ‘interrupted improvement’. These are people who, overall, improve their wellbeing over time between first applying for benefits and my last contact with them. However, contrary to those experiencing progressive improvement, the period in-between is characterised by significant ups and downs. Table 14 shows an overview of the different trajectory types.

Table 14: Trajectory types

Type of trajectory	Cases	Number of cases
a. In and out	Peter, Lærke	2
b. Decreasing competence	Thomas, Signe, Julie	3
c. Progressive improvement	Astrid, Ida, Michael, Sia, Theis, Niels, Ellen, Thor, Oscar, Clara, Alfred	12
d. Interrupted improvement	Jack, Anne, Jesper, Christian, Troels, Pelle, Jane, Sarah	8

Note: In two cases (Lotte and Frederik) I assessed my data as too limited to construct a trajectory

These categories are based on an analysis of similar patterns when it comes to people’s experience of autonomy and competence over time. However, each category contains a great deal of variation when it comes to other aspects of individual differences and experiences over time. In the following, I examine each of these trajectory types in order.

a. In and out

This is the uncomplicated trajectory, where people either find work or education by themselves without needing any help, or where they are able to find work or education within a short time, with a little help from a single or a few interventions. These are people who are already doing quite well when they

enter the benefits system, with no or few other challenges besides unemployment.

There are only two cases of this kind of trajectory in the data. One is Peter, who is the only person among the interviewees who did not have any challenges besides unemployment. He was offered a course where he could receive support to apply for jobs, which he found useful both for his job search and for receiving guidance on choosing an education. After some months, it was indicated to him that he might be expected to participate in a job placement soon, which served as an incentive to intensify his job search. In the end, he found a job through his own network. By the time of the second interview, he was employed in full-time work in a job with which he was content, and he had decided which education he wanted to apply to. Peter's plan was from the beginning to find temporary work until he would start studying, but he was unsure about which education to choose and needed structure to help build his sense of competence, and hence his motivation, for searching for jobs.

The other case is Lærke, who knew from the beginning that she would like to apply for a specific education, and was simply looking for something to do while waiting to start. She was very interested in doing a job placement relevant to her education, but unfortunately it did not happen because of COVID-19. So, in reality, she did not experience any support, but also no hindrances, and did not in fact require any support from the Jobcentre. By the second interview, she had started her education as planned, and was doing well, with support from teachers and councillors at the school.

While these two people have in common that they did not face any great need for support from the Jobcentre, and were able to quickly exit benefits, they are very different in other ways: Peter described an unproblematic family background, with a happy childhood, positive school experiences in primary and secondary school, and no mental health issues. He only needed a bit of structure and guidance to find work and decide on which education to pursue.

On the contrary, Lærke had a turbulent childhood and experienced severe bullying and many difficulties in primary school. She was diagnosed with ADHD as a teenager, is dyslexic, and grew up with a single mother who is also on benefits. As such, she has faced many difficulties and traumatic experiences in her life and is in that respect more similar to the other interviewees. However, with the help of a trusted mentor she was able to complete her primary school education with decent grades, and this mentor has also been able to guide her in her choice of education path.

At the time of applying for benefits, she was still living at home with her mother, and although they did not have much money, they had a good relationship, without the conflicts that have characterised many of the other interviewees' stories. Lærke was doing well at the time, and while her ADHD and

dyslexia require some accommodations from her school, she did not experience any mental health issues. At this point in time, she was therefore ready and able to start education without any support from the Jobcentre.

b. Decreasing competence

Quantitative studies operate with so-called ‘lock-in’ effects, as a way to describe the fact that people may spend time on an activity which could have been better spent on searching for jobs. The overall effect of an activity on employment may then become negative, if it does not subsequently have a positive effect on entering employment, which is greater than the negative effect that comes from taking time away from job search.

This mechanism is clearly on display in the kind of trajectory that I have termed ‘decreasing competence’. What characterises these trajectories is that there is little or no progress towards employment or education. They are characterised by a string of interventions, often job placements, sometimes mixed with courses, which do not lead to progress towards employment or education. Not only do these interventions take up time that could have been better spent on other activities, they also lead to decreased competence, when people experience putting in efforts, at for example job placements, which do not lead to employment.

There are only three of these cases among my interviewees. What these three have in common is that they do not experience a positive development in their wellbeing between first entering the benefits system and my last point of contact with them. Beyond this, they are again very different cases.

Thomas provides a good example of someone who has been through a long string of job placements that, for a long time, did not lead to employment. Thomas’ experience of the benefits system starts right after high school in 2016. He spent six months signed up for support at the Jobcentre, without being able to find work. He repeatedly referred to this as a formative experience, which permanently damaged his sense of competence in relation to job search. On the other hand, he never expressed doubts about his ability to handle a job.

Following the first period on benefits, he attended two different schools providing informal education in the area he is interested in working in. After that, he was again signed up at the Jobcentre, around 2017. Between 2017 and 2021 he participated in seven different job placements of four weeks each, as well as two short courses. There might have been even more, if there had not been a pause on job placements imposed by COVID-19.

Thomas is one of the few interviewees who do not have a diagnosis or mental illness. Yet he faces other barriers to finding work, and it seems that case-

workers were not able to accurately determine his barriers and help him overcome them. By the time of the final interview, he had in fact found a job through the Jobcentre, but the work entailed hard physical labour in a poor working environment and with a long commute from his home, so already after a few months, by the time of the final interview, he had decided to quit his job. At the follow-up focus group discussion after the data collection ended, he was back on benefits again.

Signe entered the benefits system when she was unable to find a shop who would take her on as a trainee so that she could complete her education as a shop assistant. She participated in two different job placements of eight weeks each during the interview period, but without being offered a trainee position or ordinary employment. She describes how her two job placements in practice worked as a kind of negative feedback. She did everything she could to prove her worth to the employers, but was still not rewarded with a job. As she mentioned in one of the later interviews, the more time passed without any progress, the less competent she felt.

Finally, Julie is a case of someone with much more severe challenges. She was institutionalised as a child and has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. While she has gained some measure of stability through participation in courses during her time on benefits, she has not moved closer to work or education. She has experienced recurrent failures when not being able to comply with the expectation to make progress and express deep mistrust in the system. She might have been able to make further progress during the interview period, if not for the sudden death of her mother. She was still in the process of recovering from this loss at the time of my last contact with her.

What these three cases have in common is that job placements were not used strategically as part of a plan for personal development, and they involved too much acceptance of companies who use the young people as free labour without a view to ordinary employment or specific competences that can be gained.

In Thomas' case, the Jobcentre seemed to realise this quite late, after several years, after which a new caseworker shifted to an approach with more direct job search assistance. In reality, he would have benefitted from more guidance on education earlier – and more general career guidance.

Both Thomas and Signe expressed being quite flexible when it comes to the kind of work they could do, and both had positive experiences with job placements. However, the Jobcentre was not able to help them find relevant work or, in Signe's case, a trainee position. In Thomas' case, the warehouse job he was finally offered and had decided to quit has a reputation for having a poor working environment and jobs there has also been turned down by other interviewees.

A further stumbling block for both Thomas and Signe lies in the education system. When Thomas finally identified an education he was interested in, and spent a lot of time putting together a portfolio to apply, his application was rejected. Signe wanted to finalise her education, but was unable to find a shop that wanted to take her on as a trainee, and she did not receive any help from her school to find a trainee position.

Finally, Julie is clearly a case of someone who is much more difficult to help, and supporting her development of competence would require a much more intensive long-term set of interventions tailored to her specific needs. Supporting her would most likely require a long process of trust-building.

c. Progressive improvement

The ‘progressive improvement’ typology is the ideal situation, and also the most common, with a total of twelve cases among the interviewees. It is characterised by people who start from a situation of poor mental health when first applying for benefits, often having experienced mental breakdowns with severe depression and/or anxiety, and then gradually improve their wellbeing through a process of recovery. This often occurs as a result of psycho-education courses, often over a period of more than a year, sometimes combined with job placements when the young people feel ready for it.

One example of this is Ida. As is true of several other cases of this type, she first applied for benefits after having dropped out of university because of stress, and she was experiencing severe depression at the time. During her time on benefits, she was able to gradually improve through participation in a psycho-education course. At the time of the final interview, her mental health and wellbeing had improved markedly, and she was looking forward to testing herself with a job placement. Even though her overall experience is of a positive trajectory of recovery, there were bumps along the way, which is typical of the experience of others as well.

She describes herself as being in a state of denial at first about how bad her mental health actually was. This led her to start a new education already after six months on benefits, against the advice of her caseworker. Because of her mental health issues, she had to drop out of the new education already after three weeks, which she describes as an experience of failure that affects her sense of competence negatively.

There are several other cases that also begin with people getting worse, as they struggle to recognise and accept the severity of their mental illness. Another bump on the way for both Ida and others were the COVID-19 lockdowns. For Ida, these lockdowns prolonged her recovery and affected her wellbeing negatively, as she was unable to attend her course and felt lonely and isolated. COVID-19 also delayed her start in a job placement.

Michael and Niels are both examples of similar cases. Like Ida, they both applied for benefits after having dropped out of university education, and were both very badly affected by depression when first applying for benefits. Through a long period of between one and two years attending psycho-education courses they were able to recover. A job placement at the time when they felt ready for it helped them regain a sense of competence in relation to holding a job. At the time of the final interview, both were expressing feeling well, Michael was employed in a job he enjoyed and felt comfortable in, and Niels had been accepted at the education he wanted.

Bo represents a very different background story, but with a similarly positive trajectory. He had a turbulent upbringing, is diagnosed with ADHD and experienced many difficulties during primary school. In his case, it took a long time attending a course to make progress, three years, but this was what provided him with a stable basis and a renewed sense of competence which finally allowed him to complete a math course and take the final exam of primary school and enrol as a part-time student in secondary education.

While these cases show that it takes time to get back on your feet after long periods with depression and stress, it is worth noting that the recovery period would probably have been shorter if not for two COVID-19 lockdowns which meant a pause on courses and job placements, and which for most people were experienced as having a negative impact on wellbeing.

The main lesson from these cases is that for these young people with severe mental health problems, courses that help them improve their mental health are essential, and these need to be provided until people feel ready to move on. Job placements can then be brought into the mix as a good way for the young people to further build their sense of competence, explore different career paths, and gain a sense of their ability to function in a workplace.

d. Interrupted improvement

This type of trajectory is similar to the progressive improvement type in the way that these are people who begin from a very low starting point, often with severe mental illness, and then end up at a place of improved wellbeing. However, the road in-between these two points is more bumpy in this type of trajectory, with people experiencing both negative and positive turning points. The central question for these cases is whether the Jobcentre is able to act in a way that provides the right help when people hit these ‘bumps’.

Sia is a good example of someone with a long history on benefits, with several positive and negative turning points. She started at with a course providing physical education, which she experienced as good for her, but which did not result in sustainable recovery. She had a negative turning point when she briefly moved to another city with her boyfriend and stopped attending the

course. She resumed the course when she returned to Aarhus, and it helped her again to feel better. However, when she started secondary education again, she experienced another downturn with a reoccurrence of depression and anxiety.

A positive turning point came when she started attending a psycho-education course, which she followed for more than a year. She also participated in a job placement, but this was not a good match with her interests and abilities, as she found the environment very stressful. However, she was able to abort the placement in time to avoid lasting negative impacts on her wellbeing. Shortly after, she started secondary education again, this time part-time, and by the time of the final interview she had finalised her classes and was working part-time in a café, with plans to resume her secondary education part-time in six months' time. Her case shows again the importance of psycho-education courses for recovery. She had ups and downs in the first part of her period on benefits, but entered a progressive improvement trajectory after starting the psycho-education course.

Anne is another example of this type of trajectory. She was initially on sick leave with no activities, which helped her improve her mental health somewhat. However, without support to understand her mental health situation better, she underestimated the severity of her illness and started work before she was ready for it, which sent her back into severe depression.

Coming back onto benefits shortly after, she was then offered the chance to begin a psycho-education course. Hers could have been a case of progressive improvement, starting from a place of severe depression, going through a period of recovery through the psycho-education course, and ending in a job placement that improved her sense of competence and made her feel ready to start education again (she had already applied to start education again the following semester). However, in between these points, she lost her mother suddenly, which threw her back into severe depression, and both her and her boyfriend were at one point briefly admitted to the psychiatric hospital. Her positive trajectory was therefore interrupted in a very severe way.

Anne could have used more intensive support during this difficult time, which might have helped her avoid getting to the point where she had to admit herself to the psychiatric hospital. But at least the Jobcentre did not add to her difficulties by placing any demands on her at this time, and she described the psycho-education course as a game changer for her, helping her through the difficult time, and then helping her get back on her feet. Once she felt ready, the course provider helped organise a job placement at relevant work place, which had a positive impact on her sense of competence and made her feel ready to resume her education.

The conclusion based on these different trajectories is that an effective active labour market system has to be flexible and able to react in a way that is appropriate to people's situation at a specific time. More than being about individual characteristics, it is about each individual's situation at specific points in time.

For the group of young people whose only challenge is to find a job, the task of the Jobcentre is relatively simple. For example in the case of Peter, who simply needed a bit of structure to help build his sense of competence and thereby also his motivation for searching for jobs. This group can relatively quickly be supported to exit benefits again in a situation with low unemployment. In a situation of high unemployment, this task would be more difficult and more people would be expected to stay for longer in the system, with potentially negative consequences for their sense of competence.

This process is illustrated by the group of people who were not able to enter work or education during the interview period. They experienced repeated failures through recurrent job placements which did not lead to ordinary employment. The limitations of job placements as a strategy for supporting the young people is clear from this group. Similarly, some of the young people described participating in successive short informal skills development courses that did not contribute to their progress towards work or education.

On the contrary, among the group of young people who experienced progressive improvement throughout the period, job placements were used strategically as a bridge between psychosocial support and work or education. For many of these young people, job placements worked well, as a way of testing their social skills (for example after recovering from anxiety), building their sense of competence, or getting an experience of potential career paths in order to choose education. What is clear from these trajectories is the importance of timing: these young people were not ready for job placements when first applying for benefits, and often only after more than a year of psychosocial support did they feel ready to benefit from a job placement.

In the next section, I take a closer look specifically at the young people's experiences of job placements.

8.3. Job placements: forced labour or meaningful skills development?

Job placements is one of the most widely used interventions in Danish active labour market policies. Similarly, they are also a very common element of ALMPs in other countries. As mentioned previously, there is a large critical literature of welfare conditionalities, which describe job placements as essentially meaningless forms of activation in which unemployed people are exploited as free labour.

On the other hand, there are also other accounts which provide a more nuanced picture. It is therefore relevant to examine the young people's reasons for participating in job placements. Do they experience this as something they have to do, or do they experience a sense of autonomy and choice in relation to whether or not to participate? Another question is how they then experience the actual placements once they are in the workplace. In this section, I examine these questions in turn.

8.3.1. Motivations for participating in job placements

We have already looked in the previous chapter at how different types of decision-making processes are experienced by the young people. In this chapter, I now use SDT's Organismic Integration Theory more actively to better understand different types of motivation for participating in job placements.

Motivation for participating in courses could be analysed in the same manner, but job placements are an interesting case, because they are often seen as mandatory requirements by the young people. What is interesting is therefore whether, how, and when they are able to internalise this requirement to participate in job placements.

As a first step in the analysis, this section provides a descriptive account of the various types of motivation described by young people in relation to participation in job placements. This section is based on a closed coding of all cases of job placement experiences, based on codes derived from SDT.

The welfare conditionality literature often describes conditionalities as mandatory requirements, which citizens only participate in because they have to in order to avoid sanctions. This is what is conceptualised as "external motivation" in Self-Determination Theory. I did not find this type of motivation to be dominant among the young unemployed people interviewed.

Instead, perhaps surprisingly, I found that most of the young people were able to successfully integrate the external demand to participate in job placements. That is, they were able to accept participation as something they chose for themselves, because it makes sense for them. A total of 26 of the 39 cases of job placement experiences identified (including both experiences of the realised placements and those that were merely discussed) can be best described as cases of identified motivation.

There were however also experiences of controlled forms of motivation, which help illuminate when and how the internalisation process fails. These included three cases of introjected motivation, six cases of external motivation, and three cases of amotivation. In the following, I provide more detail on each type of motivation.

Intrinsic and integrated motivation are the two most autonomous forms of motivation. Recall that integrated motivation refers to motivation for activities which are not seen as joyful in and of themselves, but which are nevertheless experienced as being an integrated part of who we are. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to activities which are satisfying in themselves, and are carried out simply because it is joyful to do so. We would probably not expect people to wish to participate in job placements because they are perceived to be joyful in and of themselves, as they are usually explicitly described as a means to an end (as described above).

Identified motivation is a moderately autonomous form of motivation. It refers to motivation for activities that are perceived as a means to an end (and are therefore extrinsically motivated), but which are approved by the self (and are therefore not controlled). This is by far the most common type of motivation expressed by the young people interviewed.

Well, we talked about ... I like to knit, so we have talked about yarn stores or book stores or things like that ... [course employee] presented it like I could wish for anything I wanted, and then the woman who takes care of job placements would do her best to find something which would fit. So, it was very much like a buffet I could choose from (Ida, ID07-INT02).

In this case, Ida has been following a psycho-education course for about a year and has been discussing with the manager the option of doing a job placement in a few months' time. In this context, job placements are seen as a next step on the progression from psycho-education towards being ready to start education. As such, they are understood by the young people to be something they have to do, but also something that they perceive to have a degree of control over. In this case, Ida is able to make suggestions for possible job placements that she is interested in, and based on conversations with the manager, she is able to make sense of the job placement as something which might be useful for her, and which is aligned with her own preferences.

The young people interviewed described different ways in which job placements can be useful for them: as a way to gain work experience in order to become more attractive to potential future employers; as a way to connect with potential future employers; as a way to test their ability to function in a work environment, in particular for young people suffering from social anxiety; and, as a way to gain knowledge of a particular field of work, with the aim to be better able to choose the right education.

The balance between controlled and autonomous motivation varies between individuals. In some cases, job placements are suggested by caseworkers, and the young person agrees to participate and finds ways to make the best of the situation. In other cases, job placements are suggested by the young

persons themselves, and are actively used as part of their own strategy for finding work or becoming ready to start education. Both Theis and Lærke, who were both living with their parents and were not dependent on the income from the Education Benefit, in fact described the possibility of doing job placements as their main motivation for applying for benefits in the first place.

Introjected motivation refers to carrying out activities because of an internal pressure to do so. It is a moderately controlled form of motivation, based on the experience of internal demands to behave in a certain way, even though this is not aligned with one's true wishes. This usually eventually leads to breakdowns in the form of stress and depression, as there is misalignment between the activities one engages in, and one's actual interests. While not a typical experience, the three deviant cases showing this type of motivation are useful for illustrating how introjected motivation can have severely negative consequences.

I like to please, so my enthusiasm for things that were said, it was fake in a certain way, so when I think back on it, I didn't have any real interest in doing that job placement I chose. And that was probably what in the end made me fall into a hole afterwards. Because then I was suddenly in reality, and it was just ... all that ... what do you call it ... all that energy I had built up, it wasn't real ... It was incredibly transgressive. In such a ... I remember, it was on a physical level ... I was, like, very shaken after my first day at work. But it was just ... when I came home after that first day I was just ... I was done. I mean, I was done, because, I had to spend a lot of energy on something which I didn't have very much energy to do. So I had a giant relapse at that time (Troels, ID15-INT01).

In the excerpt above, Troels describe how he had succeeded in convincing both himself and his caseworker that he would benefit from participation in a job placement at a kindergarten, despite suffering from social anxiety. The quote describes well how this particular type of motivation can be experienced, and how it can potentially result in job placements having severe negative effects. In this case, the introjected motivation which stemmed from internal pressure to adhere to expectations of making progress towards the labour market, and the participation in an ill-suited job placement that followed, had a disastrous effect on Troels' wellbeing, who was set back many months in his efforts to overcome severe anxiety and depression.

External motivation: None of the young people described being explicitly forced to participate in job placements, under threat of having their benefits removed. However, some nevertheless felt compelled to do so in order to adhere to the expectations of caseworkers, and did not feel that they had the option to say no.

Interviewer: But what is the purpose for you to do that internship?

Jack: I don't know. It is just something I have to do.

Interviewer: But why ... do you know why your caseworker suggested it?

Jack: Because the system says that I have to. I don't know [laughing]. I don't know. I just do what I'm told. So, I don't know ... I think that is just what they do. They put people in job placements.

Interviewer: But what is the purpose?

Jack: I don't know. I don't get it man.

Interviewer: But were you not able to say no to doing it?

Jack: Don't think so. I don't think so because ... maybe if there were some breaks where I could have said, 'I don't like this, I don't know if I can work there'. Maybe there would have been something I could do, you know, disrupt, delay, you know, these things. Said things. But again, I would like to ... I would like to be within the boundaries, I would like to do what you are supposed to do (Jack, ID05-INT01).

Here, Jack shows very clearly a complete inability to make sense of the job placement that he is doing. He has no sense of ownership of the decision that was made for him to carry out the activity, but is simply doing what his caseworker tells him to do. Not only is he unable to make sense of the activity for himself, he is also unable to see any purpose of the activity from the perspective of the Jobcentre and the caseworker: 'it is just what they do'.

He did not experience explicitly being coerced to do the activity, but he also did not feel that he had the ability to say no, as he wanted to conform to the expectations of the caseworker. This example shows how the context of welfare conditionalities can lead to people spending time and energy in activities that are not meaningful to them.

Anyway, I was put in touch with this Company Consultant, and the idea was that I should get out and get a job placement. And it is like this, when you get a Company Consultant, they have to get you going with something within a certain time. I can't remember if it is a month or something like that. Where they have to get you into something. And seeing that he couldn't find any job placements within a month, and we were looking at lots of places, and sent out some emails, after about a month's time he said that the objective was that I should get out and do something, and then he started finding some alternatives to job placements. Including this thing where I was going to work at a construction site, where I was asked in a phone conversation how I feel about physical labour. So, I said that I was ok with that as such, but that it wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But then I was offered to get out as someone who breaks down stuff at a construction site, to which I said 'Yes, well, if that's what I have to do, then that's what I'll have to do, but that wasn't exactly the intention' (Theis, ID13-INT04).

In this interview, Theis describes at length his feelings and reactions to the experience of a Company Consultant who he felt pressured him to start a job placement that he had no interest in. He describes the sense that the Company Consultant had to find some kind of activity for him, regardless of the content, and how he felt pressured to agree to it.

In the interview, he goes on to describe how he did not feel that he was able to say no without being forced to exit the benefits system. Theis is one of the young people who lived at home at this time, and he was not dependent on receiving benefits. However, he describes how he would feel like a failure if he had to exit the benefits system without having made progress towards education or work.

He subsequently talked about this with his caseworker, who reassured him that he did not have to do anything that he did not feel was meaningful, and that it would not make sense for him to do physical labour in a job placement, when his main objective was to prepare to apply for an IT education.

Amotivation: According to SDT, amotivation is characterised by no experience of intention or competence to carry out an activity. It is a state where a person does not spontaneously develop interest in an activity, potentially because the person's psychological needs have been undermined to such an extent that it becomes difficult to embrace the activity (Ravn, 2021, p. 49). Among the unemployed young people, this feeling towards job placements usually arises because of mental health issues such as depression and stress, which give rise to the feeling that one lacks the necessary competence to carry out activities.

Ida: And then we also talked about the possibility of a job placement. But at that time, I think I still felt a bit like ... I thought that was very overwhelming to have to get into.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Ida: I think, both because I wasn't sure which direction I wanted to go, or like ... but also just that I hadn't, at that time I hadn't really done anything in a whole year. And then you start doubting if you are at all capable of ... you know, if I am not even capable of writing a job application, am I capable of having a job? So I think I had a lot of anxiety about having to go out to a place where I had to be there, and where I would have responsibilities. I think ... because I myself had started to doubt a bit whether I would be able to do it at all, or like, would be capable of it (Ida, ID07-INT01).

Ida's experience shows that supporting people to recover from prolonged periods of inactivity as a result of mental health issues can be a long process. The fact that she had been ill for a while, and had experienced not being capable of relatively simple tasks such as writing a job application, had made her unsure

about her ability to function in a work place. In particular, she expresses anxiety about having to live up to other people's expectations ("having responsibilities"). Table 15 shows an overview of the different types of motivation and examples from the interviews.

Table 15: Examples of different types of motivation

Motivation	Amotivation			Extrinsic		Intrinsic
Regulation	Non-regulation	External	Introjected	Identified	Integrated	
Example	"And then one can easily doubt if one is capable at all of ... I mean, if I am not even able to send a job application, am I capable of having a job?"	"I feel that I primarily just go along ... Do what is expected of me."	"My enthusiasm for things that were said, it was fake ... I didn't have any real interest in doing that job placement I chose."	"I would like to do it ... in terms of becoming more clear about education, it would make sense."	"I have worked two jobs when I was 14, so I know what it means to work and earn your own money."	N/A

The above descriptive analysis of young people's experiences shows how SDTs theory of motivation can be useful for identifying different types of motivation for participating in activation such as mandatory job placements.

Perhaps surprisingly, most of the young people described identified motivation, meaning that they were able to internalise the demand to participate in job placements and make it personally meaningful. However, there are also examples where the internalisation fails, with either introjected or external forms of motivation. The question is then what characterises the situations that support or prevent positive internalisation and thereby motivation to participate in job placements.

8.3.2. Which circumstances support autonomous motivation for participation in job placements?

As described in Chapter 3, SDT enables the development of theoretical predictions as to whether aspects of a social context are likely (or unlikely) to support the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and thereby to support positive motivation, personal development, and wellbeing.

In general, contexts which support autonomy are those that provide choice and encourage self-regulation (i.e. the ability to act in accordance with one's desires). Contexts that support competence are those that provide structure and positive feedback, and contexts that support relatedness are those that

offer the caring support of others (Ryan & Deci 2017). These expectations provide a starting point for analysing when and how the context of ALMPs can support autonomous forms of motivation for participating in job placements.

Feeling listened to and respected: When analysing people's experiences of job placements, one of the circumstances that appears most important for understanding whether successful internalisation happens is whether the young person experiences frontline workers as listening to them and respecting their needs.

[Job Consultant] was really good, because she said to me 'I can see that you have first and second priorities', and then I explained to her that I had just put in a second priority because I had to, but I am really not going to do that. I mean ... it is not going to happen ... And she listened to what I said, and she said 'you know what, that is completely ok. I have had a lot of people in [shop]. We will find a place for you. We will' (Signe, ID03-INT01).

In this case, Signe describes a preference for doing a job placement in a particular chain of shops, with the hope that she can subsequently get a trainee position in the same shop. She describes earlier how she did not feel that her caseworker listened to her, and how she was forced to provide a second priority even though she had no interest in doing a job placement elsewhere. On the contrary, upon meeting the Job Consultant responsible for finding a job placement for her, she describes a feeling of being listened to, as described in the quote. The positive experience stems from both a feeling of warmth, i.e. that the Consultant cares about her interests, and of competence, as the Consultant is quickly able to find a placement in the right shop. The Job Consultant becomes an ally in her pursuit of a trainee position, which can allow her to finish her education and get a job, and the result is a job placement that is meaningful to her.

On the contrary, Signe also described a sense of controlled motivation for a different job placement, where she did not perceive any specific purpose of the placement, other than providing her with something to do. She did not feel that the caseworker listened to her and respected her particular needs. In this case, and other cases of external motivation, the lack of rationale means that people are unable to internalise the demand to participate.

Often, the young people are not averse to job placements as such, but it has to be the right offer at the right time. One interviewee described a lot of resistance towards doing a job placement right away when she first registered with the Jobcentre. She did not feel that she would be able to manage it, and even the thought of it triggered anxiety. In this case, the caseworker listened to her concerns and instead offered her a psycho-education course at a non-profit course provider.

At the time of our first interview, they were again discussing the option of doing a job placement, and the interviewee was now able to make sense of it as a way of gaining more knowledge about different education and job paths. This example shows the importance of activation happening in accordance with the wishes of people themselves, and how this requires caseworkers who are willing to listen to and respect concerns expressed by the unemployed person.

Establishing a trusting relationship: Another important aspect of the relation between the young person and the frontline worker is that a trusting relationship is required in order to ensure that job placements match ability. This is particularly important since most of the young people interviewed struggle with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

It is a little anxiety provoking still, but I think it is also quite good to get out and test myself, and see how anxiety provoking it really is.

And then I had a chat with [non-profit employee] and also with [non-profit employee] who manages these job placements, and it calmed me down somehow. The fact that if it doesn't work out, it is ok to pull out of the job placement, and that there is no coercion in terms of having to complete the full four weeks, if everything goes to hell. I think that also gave me a feeling of safety (Ida, ID07-INT03).

In this case, Ida acknowledges the challenge of doing a job placement while recovering from a period of severe social anxiety. What gives her the confidence to do so is a close and trusting relationship with a frontline worker at a non-profit course provider, which provides a "feeling of safety" from knowing that she can stop the placement at any time if she does not feel comfortable continuing.

It is important to recognise that even a few hours a week in a shop can be a big deal for someone suffering from severe social anxiety, and people therefore need to have a relationship with a frontline worker who can assure them that the placement will happen in a safe manner.

This relationship is particularly important when working within a welfare conditionality regime with control as its foundation, which exacerbates the fear of failure. The trust in the frontline worker needs to counteract the fear of potentially being forced to complete four weeks of an anxiety provoking job placement, or having to drop out prematurely and face the consequences of not complying with the conditionalities.

As described in Chapter 7, this explains why most of the young people interviewed express a strong desire to establish and maintain a positive relationship with their caseworker. Whenever they do not have much contact with the

caseworker, find it difficult to reach them, or find it difficult to establish a positive relationship, they experience anxiety.

Building a close relationship requires relatively frequent meetings, as well as a particular attitude of caseworkers. The young people often describe having a closer relationship with frontline workers at non-profit course providers than with their caseworkers. They have more frequent meetings with the former, often every second or third week, and some young people also describe a difference in attitude between the two types of frontline workers; municipal caseworkers are more likely to make specific suggestions for activities, and non-profit employees are more prone to asking questions and maintaining focus on the safety and wellbeing of the young person.

Establishing a rationale through dialogue: In general, it is clear that when young people perceive that job placements are arranged because it is a requirement, or because Company Consultants have targets to reach, this leads to controlled forms of motivation. Successful internalisation happens in the situations where job placements are arranged based on a dialogue between citizen and caseworker which is perceived to be respectful and to take into account the needs and preferences of the young person.

In the two cases of introjected motivation, the young people also describe caseworkers as seeming willing listening to their needs, but also that for personal reasons they find it difficult to talk openly about their own needs. They both describe themselves as “pleasers”, and to be “a pleaser” under a welfare conditionality regime means accepting whatever the caseworker suggests.

The cases of introjected motivation show clearly the importance of a caseworker approach that does not reinforce the expectation for the young person to accept any offer, but rather works against it. In practice, this means building trusting relations, practicing active listening, and asking the young people about their own feelings, needs, and preferences, before making any specific suggestions for activities.

8.3.3. Experiences of job placements

The young people’s experience of motivation for participating in job placements is one thing, but their experience of actually participating in the placements is quite another. Theoretically, we would expect more autonomous forms of motivation to also lead to more positive experiences of participating in the job placement. In this section I will examine to what extent this is indeed the case. I examine how the young people experience participation in job placements, and how different experiences are associated with basic psychological needs and motivation to enter education and work. Here it is particularly the basic psychological need for competence which is in focus, although I also consider support for autonomy and relatedness.

The data contain a total of 28 cases of realised job placements. Because of a pause on job placements during part of the data collection period (as a result of COVID-19 policies), quite a few of the job placements that were discussed between the young people and caseworkers were never realised. The number of cases of actual job placements is therefore lower than the number of cases of potential job placements considered in the analysis above, and almost certainly lower than it would have been if not for the COVID-19 pandemic.

As mentioned previously, participating in job placements is something that is expected of most the young people sooner or later, as part of showing that they are making progress towards work or education. Yet, many interviewees (13 in total) never participated in job placements during the time between entering benefits and the last interview.

For some, this was because they participated in courses as the main intervention, and then entered work or education before a job placement became relevant. Others were looking for a job placement during much of the interview period, but were unable to find one because of COVID-19, which caused a complete stop on new job placements during certain periods and made it more difficult to find job placements during other periods.

Most of the remaining 14 interviewees participated in between one and three job placements. For some, job placements were the main intervention and for others, placements were combined with courses. As described in the previous section, when considering the young people's trajectories over time, the most successful use of job placements appears to be as a bridge between a psycho-social course and work or education.

Finally, two cases, Thomas and Alfred, had by the time of the final interview participated in seven and five job placements respectively. In both cases, the Jobcentre, during the interview period, expressed that the recurrent job placements had continued for too long, and shifted to a strategy of more direct support for job search. As a result, both Thomas and Alfred were in ordinary employment by the time of the last interview. Thomas had finally gotten a job following a placement in a warehouse, but had decided to quit again because of the poor working conditions there. Alfred also ended up being employed by a company where he had previously done a job placement, and was content with his employment by the time of the final interview.

As I argue below, the analysis of the young people's different experiences shows the importance of job placements that support people's basic psychological needs, as well as placements that are experienced as meaningful in relation to achieving the young people's own goals. These two dimensions mean that I can identify four different types of experiences: a) Needs-supportive and meaningful, b) Needs-supporting but not meaningful, c) Needs-thwarting but meaningful, and d) Needs-thwarting and not meaningful. Below I provide a

more in-depth analysis of each of these experiences and provide examples from the interviews.

Figure 5: Typology of job placements based on experiences of meaning and support for basic psychological needs

		Meaning	
		High	Low
Basic psychological needs	High	Needs-supportive, meaningful (N=11)	Needs-supportive, not meaningful (N=8)
	Low	Needs-thwarting, meaningful (N=3)	Needs-thwarting, not meaningful (N=6)

a. The needs-supportive and meaningful job placement experience

I identify ten cases of experiences where the young people both experience the workplace as supporting their basic psychological needs and as being meaningful in relation to their goals. As mentioned above, we would perhaps not expect many people to experience job placements as valuable in and of themselves. However, Michael described his experience of participating in a job placement, working as an assistant to the janitors in the building of a course provider, in a way which comes close to describing intrinsic motivation.

That is what is so great about [course employee] who is responsible for job placements. She really gets involved in trying to find something which people can recognise themselves in, or which they think, perhaps I would be interested in studying this. So, for example I have for a long time thought about wanting to study to become a woodworker. So she went out to try and find that.

It turns out that it is quite difficult to find a job placement with a woodworker, because it is not a super big industry. Especially because I would like to study furniture making, so that's even more narrow. So in the end she ... well, we had a talk, and then I said 'you know what, just find something that's in the ballpark, that's fine'. Because then I would still get the structure and such.

So, it ended up with her finding something in the basement, with the janitors. And so far it has been great. Before I probably had an impression of janitors as someone who ... you know ... it's a bit slow and things like that. But it is really exciting, and well... I experience that I am actually not ... of course they would get by without me, but it makes a difference that I am there. Meaning that I can do some work that is positive for them. It is not like they spend more energy on me being there than what I contribute. And it is very very nice to work in a place like that.

There was one day where they were instructing us, me and another guy, in how to put wallpaper on a wall, and then they had us wallpaper a whole wall. And it

wasn't just like, oh, this wall doesn't really matter, it was a wall in a new office. And we were just allowed to do that, and there is no micro-management, it is just, okay now you know how to do it, then just do it, right? It is really special that they just trust that we can do it, even if I have never put up wallpaper before. And we did it really well too, if I may say so myself, right? So it is positive to get these experiences that I can actually do something. And I can add value, even if I haven't necessarily tried everything before.

And even if it is just cleaning a toilet, you can have some pride in doing a good job. And I also get a lot of praise. And these managers, they say all the time 'you can be proud of that' and that is awesome. You know, that there is also room for someone like me, right? (Michael, ID08-INT01),

Even though the job involved simple tasks which are on the face of it not particularly interesting – including cleaning a toilet and putting up wallpaper in offices – Michael describes deriving a deep sense of satisfaction from being able to complete these very practical tasks in a satisfactory manner.

In particular, he describes a boost to his sense of competence, from being able to make a valuable contribution to the janitor's work and receiving praise for his work. His job placement also supported his sense of autonomy, as he was given a great deal of freedom to carry out the tasks he was responsible for independently, without being micro-managed by the janitors, something which he also described as adding to his sense of confidence in himself. Michael's case therefore shows the importance of support for basic psychological needs in the workplace.

While Michael's account is one of the more elaborate ones, his experience is representative of the way people in general describe the positive experiences of job placements. Thomas is another example of someone describing support for the basic psychological needs in one of his job placements. Unfortunately, out of his seven job placements, he described only one in positive terms. Of the remaining, he described one in negative terms and the remaining five as neutral.

Interviewer: What has made it such a good experience?

Thomas: I think it has actually been the people and the assignments. And having responsibility and feeling that you, like, if I did not do this, it would be just as important, as if one of the regular workers here didn't do it. Yes, it has had a lot to do with the people, and the fact that I haven't just stood there peeling carrots and chopping onions. I have been a part of it. From day one.

Interviewer: Yes, so you feel that they have trusted you to be able to be a part of the team?

Thomas: Yes, and actually at our follow-up meeting, the kitchen manager said that he could see me working in a kitchen (Thomas, ID02-INT02).

Here, Thomas describes similar positive experiences as Michael. What matters most to him is the sense of being trusted to be able to carry out tasks on his own (autonomy), to feel a valuable part of the team (relatedness), and to receive positive feedback from his manager (competence). He attributes the positive experience to the manager's personal attitude to him. This experience is common to all of the positive job placement experiences, and speaks to the relevance of the SDT basic psychological needs theory for understanding how specific features of these experiences are associated with wellbeing.

It is worth noting that both Michael and Thomas emphasise what can best be described as a sense of beneficence. As described in Chapter 3, this concept has also been considered by SDT researchers as a potential basic psychological need. There is no doubt from the data that the sense of making a valuable contribution is central to the young people's sense of competence and self-worth. It also seems to be closely related to the need for relatedness, as it contributes to feeling like a valued part of the team at the workplace.

However, it is also clear when comparing different kinds of job placement experiences, that experiencing support for basic psychological needs is not sufficient for a positive experience. In addition to supporting basic psychological needs, the positive experiences are characterised by supporting people to achieve their goals.

I became more clear about where my level was in this sector. Like, what I can apply for, restaurants to work in, but also clear that I shouldn't study to become a chef. If I needed a proper job in this sector, I would have to study for that, because I can't keep up. But if I were to take an education in this sector, I think that would take too long, and then it would have to be because that's what I want to do with my life. And it isn't. So it will be unskilled kitchen worker for me.

I really learned something. All their small techniques and things they do in the kitchen when cooking for so many people. Also just being part of the workflow, there is a leaning in that in itself (Thomas, ID02-INT02).

In Thomas' case, he describes the experience in the canteen as gainful, as he became more clear about his skills in this line of work, and realised that he did not want to pursue an education to become a chef.

In Michael's case, there was also congruence between what he wanted out of the job placement and what he felt he gained from it. He describes gaining a renewed sense of confidence in his own ability to hold a job through the job placement, and coming to a realisation that he would probably enjoy making a living by working part time doing physical labour, and then spending his free time pursuing his interests. The job placement was instrumental for helping him move from a long period of recovery through a psycho-social course to being employed by the time of the final interview.

The young people's goals vary, but most often include gaining knowledge about potential career paths, with a view to selecting an education. For example, Niels had his positive thoughts about studying accounting validated through his job placement with an accounting firm, and by the time of his final interview he had been accepted into the relevant education.

Another objective of job placements is to test one's ability to function in a workplace. For example, Anne got a job placement at a canteen that she was really happy about. She went on to get a trainee position there to finalise her education as a chef. Similarly, Thor was looking for a trainee position to complete his education as a caterer, and got hired at the canteen where he started in a job placement.

b. The needs-supporting but not meaningful job placement experience

Some job placements are not experienced as directly detrimental to basic psychological needs, or may even be supportive, yet do not contribute to reaching the young people's goals. They are therefore not experienced as meaningful or gainful. The experience as such is often described as positive, yet in the end it is unsatisfactory if it does not lead to moving closer to the desired education or work, and repeated experiences of this kind can have very negative consequences for wellbeing and motivation.

For Michael, improving his sense of competence in relation to handling a job was in itself the objective of doing a job placement. However, for others that may not be the case. For Thomas, his issue with competence was always in relation to the job search process, not about whether he could actually handle having a job.

Interviewer: So are you able to use these experiences?

Thomas: [sigh], well, no. It was like, I got there, and then I could do what I could do. And it wasn't like I learned any new things. I learned where the products were. Not more than that. You know, was I able to show up prior to this? Of course I could. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it to begin with. So, no, I didn't learn anything from [hypermarket], I didn't learn anything in the fitness centre. It was just, like, to be able to write something on paper, 'yes, I can do that' (Thomas, ID02-INT01).

Most of Thomas' seven job placements are examples of experiences that were not exactly detrimental to his wellbeing, since he described them as 'okay', not exactly unpleasant, but also not particularly engaging, and not contributing to achieving his goal of getting a job. Above, he describes his experience of a job placement in a hypermarket that he did not experience as meaningful, as he did not learn anything he did not already know how to do, and the experience did not in any way contribute to his goal of getting a job.

He generally describes his experience of job placements as ‘irritating when it has been irrelevant’ in relation to helping him get a job. He describes experiencing frustration at several points due to starting job placements with the objective of being subsequently hired, but then not being offered a job at the end of the placement. This makes him feel that he wasted his time, in particular because four weeks is a long time to spend in an unskilled job where two weeks would have been more than enough to learn everything there was to learn.

Interviewer: So in the end it was another job placement which did not really lead to anything?

Signe: Yes, that’s what I felt. Because it was like, I was there just up to Black Friday, and I think they were very happy about that. So I feel like it was just exploiting the free labour once again. It is just again a defeat in a way, even before I was done there. And then you are a bit demotivated about being there, because it is like, then she may want to have me as an intern for eight months before hiring me, or maybe want to hire me as a trainee. You know, there has to be a carrot at the end before it makes sense for me to be there. Otherwise I might just as well find another place. No matter how happy I am about being there. Because it doesn’t give me any more money (Signe, ID03-INT02).

Similarly for Signe, her objective was first to get a trainee position, and then when she gave up on that, to get an ordinary job. She already knew that she could handle a job and was therefore not looking to build her sense of competence through job placements. She experienced job placements at two different shops, which she described as workplaces she quite liked, yet the experiences were unsatisfactory because they did not lead to her getting a trainee position or ordinary employment, which was what she was hoping for. For Thomas and Signe, most of their job placements were therefore not meaningful, even though the workplaces supported their psychological needs.

Of course it was demotivating and such, but in the beginning I was crazy happy about it. When I got out there and had a meeting with the manager there, I thought, ‘ok, let’s try this’. So I was hopeful, but it wasn’t like I was thinking ‘yay, I am really looking forward to this’ and I felt a bit like, ‘ugh’, the first day I had to get out there. But then there were just some super nice people out there, and there was good chemistry between the people working there, socially. So I was really happy about that, and the first two weeks went really well, I thought. And at some point another intern got there, who I was put in charge of, and when you get responsibility for another intern, it has to be because you are doing something right. But then it didn’t seem like that after all (Signe, ID03-INT02).

Signe describes here how the workplace itself actually supported her psychological needs. In particular, she liked the social relations with the other employees, and she also interpreted being given responsibility as positive feedback, supporting her sense of competence.

However, the fact that she was not in the end offered a trainee position or an ordinary job made her feel that she apparently had not been able to live up to the manager's expectations after all, since they rejected her. The experience therefore ended up having negative implications for her sense of competence in the end, because it reinforced her experience of not being able to achieve her goals. After two job placements like this, she was not motivated to do a third.

Of course, if they say, 'if you do well, maybe there is a job at the end', then I am willing to do it. But it just doesn't make sense for me to get to a third place where they say, 'well we can't hire you either'. Then I have enough goddamn experience, now I just want to get a job, now I just want something to happen.

Because, again, it becomes so demotivating and if you keep getting failures on failures on failures, then it's just not fun anymore, and then you become depressed and you lose your spark. And I don't want to lose my spark. It is a big part of me to be positive, and, like, show that I am good with people and that I have drive. And that I want to throw myself at this, no matter how little experience I may have with it, and that I give myself 100%, if not 120%, and say 'let's try it, let's give it a shot!' But if I keep being sent to places where I don't get anything out of it, then at the end I will lose it. I will lose what makes me me and maybe drop into a hole. Now, I have had depression before, so ... I just don't want that to happen because I am shoved into job placements and job placements and job placements (Signe, ID03-INT03).

Signe goes on here to elaborate on her experience of job placements that did not lead to employment, and how she is afraid that too many of these experiences would affect her wellbeing negatively. She describes clearly the negative implications of repeated experiences of failure, in the sense of not being able to achieve her objectives, and also as an experience of negative feedback on her performance, despite giving it all she has. Finally, it is the experience of not making progress; of being stuck in a position of low social status with very limited income, resulting in a limited sense of autonomy in her life.

It was a nice place, [hardware store]. I liked working there. But I didn't get any extra money. It was just working while still getting the same amount of money as before. And it would have been better for me and the Jobcentre if I had just stayed at home and searched for ordinary work instead of standing out in [hardware store] and, you know ...

Also it is just like I am undercutting myself, because why would [hardware store] have a proper employee if they can just get a bunch of, you know, people on benefits to work for free? I mean it is undercutting workers like us, and I just don't feel comfortable being a part of that, even though I liked the place. So I am happy to do that kind of work, but I would like an ordinary job, good enough hours, extra pay and such.

And that was one of the things that stressed me out, I was sitting there on the bus, and counting how much money it would cost me every month just in travel costs. And it is fucking 400 kroner every month I have to pay to do slave labour. I mean, it is not really, but it is basically. So, yes ... I have to pay to be a slave (Jack, ID05-INT02).

Similarly, Jack describes how he likes the workplace itself. He would be happy to work there as an ordinary employee. He also describes in the same interview how the job placement did after all provide him with some structure. However, it is still a negative experience for him, because he experiences it as completely meaningless in relation to moving closer to his goal of finding work. Not only does it not help him get a job, he is actually undercutting his own labour, because he is doing the same work for free as he is at other times being paid for when working at a temp agency while still receiving benefits.

Jack's experience is an example of how feeling forced to carry out a job placement perceived as meaningless can have very detrimental effects on well-being, even when the workplace itself is supportive of basic psychological needs. He describes how he experienced a panic attack one day on his way to work, arising from the feeling that he was having to spend his day doing work which he did not see any point to, without being paid, and was actually having to spend quite a lot of money on the bus going there and back. So, in a way it was the controlled motivation for doing the job placement in the first place, and the lack of sense of meaning, which caused him to have a panic attack and having to take a period of sick leave.

Considering these experiences across different individuals, it is clear that some people are able to endure more meaningless job placements and longer periods of inactivity than others. As Signe herself describes, she has a lot of drive and energy, and a need for something to happen (also related to the fact that she is diagnosed with ADHD), which makes her tolerance for activities that do not help her achieve her goals very limited. Jack also has ADHD and find it very difficult to accept having to do activities that do not make sense to him.

On the other hand, others, such as Thomas and Niels, with their long periods on benefits and long row of job placements, have more patience. They still express their dissatisfaction, but they seem willing to persevere for much longer than Signe and Jack, and have more of a tendency to internalise the

demand to participate in job placements, as long as they are not directly detrimental to their psychological needs. Still, the mechanisms and implications for wellbeing are the same, and everybody sooner or later reaches their own limit on accepting activities which are not helping them achieve their objectives.

c. The needs-thwarting but meaningful job placement experience

Some job placements are experienced as negative because the workplace is not supportive of basic psychological needs, even though the placement is in principle meaningful in relation to the young people's objectives.

Interviewer: What is it about it that you find draining?

Thomas: Well, the way it works is, you show up, then you put on a vest with a little computer in it, and then the computer says 'take this box and put it on the pallet. And then this box and put it on the pallet. Take this box and put it on the pallet'. And it just goes on constantly with these commands, so it is the same all day long. And it is not like you really talk to the other people there. At least I don't. So there is nothing dynamic or engaging about it (Thomas, ID02-INT05).

Here, Thomas explains the work at the warehouse where he did his final job placement (so far) and where he subsequently got an ordinary part-time job. The thwarting of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness involved in this job is apparent from the above excerpt. There is close to zero autonomy, insufficient challenges to support competence, and no support for relatedness. He experienced the workplace as so unpleasant that he had decided to quit the job by the time of the final interview, despite having worked there only a few months, and despite having searched for work for several years.⁷

The only thing Thomas described gaining from the work was a sense of structure, by having an activity to do during the day (whereas in the periods of no activity he tended to gradually get into a routine where he would stay up all night gaming and sleep during the day – something that he experienced as detrimental to his wellbeing, but was unable to change on his own).

In this case, the work is considered extremely unpleasant because the workplace is so detrimental to basic psychological needs. However, it is actually congruent with Thomas' objectives in a way, since he was desperate to get a job.

⁷ Coincidentally, as a student, the author once worked at the same warehouse one day a week, and found the work similarly draining, even though at least there were at that time no computers giving orders.

While the thwarting of basic psychological needs obviously meant that he did not experience any motivation to continue the work, the job placement, and subsequent ordinary job, did in a way have a positive effect on his motivation for searching for jobs, by providing him with more confidence in his ability to keep up a healthier structure in his daily life.

Julie: She suggested a job placement in relation to finding out which education I should have. Because at that time, I mentioned something about service, like waiter, restaurants and such. And then ... this was during COVID-19, so it was really difficult to find a job placement at that time. So, we talked about what I had done before and such. And I have been a cashier at a supermarket and such, so it ended up being like, the job placement was meant to help me find an education, but because it wasn't really possible because of COVID, then it just became, like 'oh well, you just need something to do'. And that was how I ended up at [shop].

Interviewer: So what do you mean by 'just something to do'?

Julie: Well, I think it was about a soft start to begin working again, because now I have been at home for a long time, and it doesn't do anything good, for me at least, mentally, in relation to having to start up again and such. So the idea was that it should be a soft start, and I also just had, I think I had from 8am-12pm, every day in that week, in [shop], which unfortunately turned out to be too much.

Interviewer: What was it that became too much?

Julie: I think it is ... for me it is a lot about... I really want to make other people feel good. And I become really, really afraid to disappoint them. And when I start at a new place, they expect me to show up, and I think ... They don't expect me to be able to do everything, but I very quickly expect that from myself. And then I don't feel that I am doing it well enough. And then it just becomes many hours during the week where I am feeling nervous. When I was filling up the shelves and such ... I was afraid to be out in the shop, because I was afraid that the customers should see me starting to cry or something. So, I don't know. I think I just needed to learn it a bit slower. And, I don't know, I didn't feel that was possible out there (Julie, UB03-INT01).

In this excerpt, Julie recounts her experience of a job placement in a shop, which turned out to be a very negative experience for her. She was there only a week before she had to call in sick. The placement was detrimental to her wellbeing, primarily because the social aspect of the job was too challenging for her at the time and she was not able to get the necessary support from the management to adapt the tasks and work hours to better accommodate her needs.

The purpose of the job placement was adjusted from initially being about her becoming clearer about her choice of education, to instead being 'just

something to do'. However, Julie was still able to perceive the placement as (at least somewhat) meaningful, as it allowed her to test her ability to function in a workplace, and gauge her mental health process. She did feel a certain pressure from the caseworker to do the job placement, and describes in the same interview how she would probably not have chosen to do so out of her own volition.

d. The needs-thwarting and not meaningful experience

Finally, some job placements are experienced both as being detrimental to basic psychological needs and as not being meaningful in relation to the young people's goals.

Sia: I think it was before I was to start studying part-time, I would like to be challenged a bit more, because it was starting to feel a bit monotonous at [course]. I needed something more challenging.

Interviewer: So was it something you took initiative to do yourself?

Sia: Yes.

Interviewer: But then it never happened, or ...?

Sia: It did, but it didn't work at all. I went down to a day-care. And it was very much associations to a workplace where I just had to do what I was told, and there wasn't so much focus on me. And looking back now, I could have probably known that it was a relatively stressful workplace. And I am not super interested in the field, so perhaps it wasn't like the smartest place to start a job placement.

Interviewer: So how come it ended up being there?

Sia: I think ... I really like children, so I just think that it would be cool to see if that was something, and then I just found out that it was a resounding no.

Interviewer: What was it that didn't work about it?

Sia: I just think it was too stressful, and it was ... too little contact.

Interviewer: Stressful how?

Sia: It was just very unstructured, you know, they can't plan anything, because you never know what happens with the kids. Suddenly someone falls over there and then you have to go over there. Then I am talking to someone, and trying, and then something happens, and it was very much like back and forth, very fleeting and very unstructured. And they were very stressed down there and ... there were a lot of resources they didn't have, and they had a lot of overtime, and had to do a lot of tasks they weren't employed to do, because it has been cut so much and such. They were just so stressed out, and I just took that right in and got crazy stressed out myself. It was just too big a step from little cosy [course] to a lot of noise (Sia, ID09-INT01).

Sia describes well here the lack of support for relatedness, as she was unable to find space to have conversations with the other employees at the day-care. She also mentions the lack of autonomy, of 'just having to do what I was told'. But most of all it was just a very unstructured and chaotic environment which she was not able to handle and which was detrimental to her sense of competence.

She had to abort the job placement, but was luckily able to do this without any problems before she became too affected by the stress. Sia's experience is similar to Troels' experience of a job placement in a kindergarten (described above), which triggered his social anxiety and was very detrimental to his mental health. In both cases, the young people experienced both not having their basic psychological needs supported, and not feeling that the placement was meaningful in relation to their goals, as they were not really interested in pursuing education or work within these areas.

Interviewer: What is the purpose of that job placement?

Julie: I really don't know. They have probably put something fancy in the papers, but I have no idea. I knew already what you do in [hypermarked] and I haven't been surprised in any way. And they also said to me that if I had that attitude then I wouldn't be surprised. But I don't have that attitude because I am not looking at what people are doing, or such, you know, I am pretty observant. She told me once that I should look at the packaging of the flowers, and if I was in doubt I would have to look at the barcode. And then she said it again, and I was a bit like, 'yes, if I am in doubt, I should look at the flowers and packaging and lalala'. And she was just like, 'oh, okay, you get it'. And I was like, 'yes, I do. You know, I understand what ... it is not hard to understand what to do'. It is not hard ... (Julie (ID18-INT01)).

Here, Julie describes a workplace which is not exactly detrimental to her basic needs, but clearly also does not support them. She describes a sense of being controlled, by being told very explicitly, and repeatedly, how to carry out tasks that she perceives as very simple and easy, which therefore does not give her any sense of competence. At the same time, she does not perceive the job placement to be meaningful for her objectives since her goal is to become ready to start education again, and her motivation for doing the placement is purely controlled, since she has 'no idea' about why she has been told to do it.

8.3.4. Conclusions

Support for basic psychological needs in workplaces is particularly important for young people with mental health issues who are doing job placements. Workplaces need managers who understand the young people's challenges

and who do what they can to adapt the working environment and tasks to the young people's needs.

Perhaps most surprising from the above analysis is that the young people are usually able to internalise the demand to participate in job placements in a positive manner, i.e. they are able to make sense of the activity. This is connected to the often positive relations with caseworkers also described in Chapter 7.

However, it is clear from the data that in some cases, the process leading to the job placement has not been ideal in terms of supporting the young people's wellbeing. This is particularly the case for those experiencing introjected or controlled forms of motivation for entering a job placement.

There is no simple connection between the type of motivation for participating in a job placement and the experience or outcome of the job placement. For example, Thomas' motivation for participating in his final warehouse job placement can best be described as identified. He perceived it as meaningful in the sense of helping him get a job. However, the actual experience ended up being detrimental to his wellbeing.

In fact, Thomas had both very positive and very negative experiences of job placements for which his motivation was originally identified. Conversely, among the cases of job placements experienced as needs-thwarting and not meaningful were both controlled (Julie), introjected (Troels), and identified (Signe) types of motivation, even though the outcomes were similarly negative.

There are no examples in the data of people with controlled or introjected motivation for job placements having positive experiences of actually doing the placement. Of course, this does not mean that this is not possible in theory. For example, Signe was not interested in doing her second job placement, but she actually ended up enjoying the work. It may well have been a positive experience for her if the employer had offered her a trainee position or a job after she completed the job placement.

It is not necessarily possible to predict how the job placement experience will turn out, since this depends on whether there is a match between the workplace and the abilities of the individual at a particular time. An important aspect of safeguarding the young people's wellbeing is therefore to ensure that they feel safe to abort the placements at any time without any negative consequences.

The importance of 'meaning' for wellbeing is a central conclusion from this chapter. Contrary to some SDT researchers, I argue that in the context of active labour market policies for young people, the sense of meaning needs to be added to the theoretical framework. This is necessary to fully understand the

young people's experiences, and to grasp how active labour market policies affect wellbeing and motivation.

There is also a temporal aspect to the distinction between the three basic psychological needs and meaning. Psychological needs are about the present – does this context support my needs right now? Meaning is related to the future – does this activity help me get where I want to go?

Even if workplaces support basic psychological needs, feeling forced to participate in activities which are experienced as meaningless in relation to one's objectives can be very detrimental to wellbeing, as is apparent from the experiences described in this section.

8.4. 'Taking yourself seriously': psychosocial support in active labour market policies

Psycho-social support, broadly understood, encompasses social, pedagogical, psychological and psychiatric interventions that aim to enhance a person's ability to function. As described above, for the young people with mental health issues – the vast majority of interviewees – psycho-social support plays an essential role in their recovery process. It is therefore worth looking specifically at their experiences to explore the role that psycho-social support can play as part of active labour market policies. In my interviews with young people who have participated in psycho-social courses through the Jobcentre, the gains from these courses stand out as crucial for their process of improving wellbeing to the point that they become ready to start education or work.

The concept of 'awareness' may be useful for understanding the role of these courses. Awareness can be defined as "open, relaxed, and interested attention to oneself and to the ambient social and physical environment" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 267). According to SDT, wellbeing depends on people being able to successfully integrate external demands, i.e. take ownership of their own actions (as per the definition of autonomy). For the process of integration to take place, people need to be able to reflect on their own needs and preferences, and process the various social norms and demands they face. Awareness of both one's own self and one's surroundings is therefore essential for integration to occur, and therefore also for wellbeing.

I just want to be able to take care of myself, and work. Also to get an education. But I am just ... I just find it difficult to figure out what it is I want, and what I ... It is also something which I don't feel clear about at all. What my place in society should be. For sure it is not on Education Benefits, or social assistance, the rest of my life, but ... I just don't know (Ida, ID07-INT01).

Following on from the discussion in Chapter 7, reflection and self-awareness are important prerequisites for young people to take control of their own lives

and of their unemployment cases. In order to take control of the narrative in their encounters with caseworkers, young people need to know what they want.

However, common to the group of young people I have interviewed is that they often describe experiencing a lot of confusion about who they are, what their place in society is and what they should do with their lives – as described by Ida in the excerpt above.

These are common questions for all young people, but they are perhaps even more pronounced for this group who almost all have experiences of taking wrong turns, finding out that they could not or did not want to take the education path they had started down, or have found themselves blocked by unsuccessful job searches or an inability to find trainee positions.

As discussed in Chapter 7, these young people are most of all looking to do what is expected of them. When first entering the benefits system, they often have only a vague sense of what they themselves want to do. This means that they often find it difficult to say no, or to clearly express their boundaries with caseworkers. The risk is therefore that they let themselves be talked into agreeing to activities which they are unable to handle, or which are not aligned with their actual preferences.

What is striking is how many of the interviewees describe a process of becoming better at sensing and reflecting on their own needs and preferences during their time on benefits. This happens in particular through participation in courses that provide various types of psycho-social support and psycho-education.

8.4.1. Psycho-social support and self-awareness

Interviewees were recruited through three different external course providers in the case municipality. One provider offered mainly job search support or support for identifying relevant education, as well as language and other classes. Another provider offered physical education, combined with mentoring. The third provider offered various types of psycho-social support. Eight of the interviewees were attending this provider at the time of recruitment, and it is the experiences of this group I focus on in the following discussion.

At this psycho-social course provider, the young people attend courses between two and five days a week, depending on how much they can manage. Usually, the number of days is adjusted upwards over time, as people's mental health improves.

Courses include a combination of group conversations, psycho-education classes, and mindfulness, meditation, and yoga classes, which the young people can choose to attend based on their interests. A typical day could for example include an hour of group conversation, followed by a fifteen minute

break, and then an hour of a psycho-education class focused on stress, anxiety, or depression. Group conversations typically include 8-16 participants. Classes are interactive and dialogue-based. The teachers are not trained psychologists and the course therefore does not officially constitute therapy. However, the young people often attend the course in combination with therapy with their own psychologist in parallel.

Courses are approved for periods of three months at a time, but are usually extended, with many interviewees attending for more than a year. Processes were likely longer than usual during the data collection period, because COVID-19 interrupted courses for extended periods of time. Whether an extension is approved or not is decided by caseworkers, in dialogue with the manager of the course provider and the young people themselves.

As mentioned above, one theme of the young people's experiences of psycho-social support can be understood as growing awareness – or, more precisely, growing self-awareness. This process is experienced as becoming better at understanding one's own preferences, needs, and patterns of behaviour.

Ida: I mainly saw that half year from august to February as a form of sabbatical or something. I knew I wasn't well, but I didn't think it was as bad as it actually was. And it was only when I started on the course that I started confronting the real issues.

Interviewer: And were you at that time starting to realise that you needed help in one way or another?

Ida: Yeah. It came a bit with [course employee] saying at that first conversation 'I don't think you are ready to start education by February'. That sort of got some thoughts started. And then I have had conversations with her in parallel, of about an hour's duration, where we got started on a lot also. But I thought ... well, I ended up starting education in February. Because I thought that now I am just fixed and ready, but I wasn't at all (Ida, ID07-INT01).

Ida describes here a typical process of starting out not fully recognising the depth of her mental illness. Upon entering the course, the first step is therefore coming to terms with the extent of her issues, and accepting that she will need a longer process of recovery before being ready to start education again. At this point Ida was struggling with severe stress, anxiety, and depression. She describes how her first six months at the course were the beginning of a process of coming to terms with her mental illness.

However, she was not far enough in the process to be able to make the decision to not start education soon after, even if she was beginning to understand how deep her mental health issues actually were. Ida describes a course employee telling her right out after their very first conversation that she did not think that Ida would be ready to start education a little less than six

months later. Ida did not agree, started education, and dropped out again shortly after, because her anxiety came back almost immediately.

It has been a sea change, it has turned everything upside down. I just think that I finally started to understand, that all the things I have been running from all these years, that I have to face them. So I have worked a lot on anxiety, the whole last year. And I have just cleaned out a lot of things, and started to admit some things to myself, and allowed myself to grieve over all the things that have happened. And how hard it has really been. And the time I was sick, maybe I wasn't just whining, even if that was what I was being told. Maybe it actually wasn't very pleasant to be in. So I have given myself room to accept that. It has ... it has simply been the key. It has been so good (Sia, ID09-INT01).

Here, Sia describes how she has been struggling with anxiety for a long time because of experiences in her childhood that she has never been able to process properly. After several years in the benefit system, the psycho-social course helped her to finally start facing some of the underlying barriers that have meant that she has never been able to finish her secondary education.

She describes how the process of working intensively on her anxiety for a year has led to the current situation at the time of the first interview, where she has started education part-time again, and is able to stick to it (a positive development that continued throughout the year of data collection). It has also led to a significant improvement in her general wellbeing; she describes how her relations with friends have improved, and how her general life satisfaction, sleep, and joy in life has improved. She describes how she feels like doing things now rather than just drinking or lying in bed.

This about taking yourself seriously, I know is something that [course employee] often encounters. If you come from the background that we often do, then it is about not knowing when to stand up for yourself, and what you are actually entitled to.

She [course employee] is good at being the 'voice of reason' and seeing it from the outside and saying, 'this is very important for you it sounds like, so we need to emphasise that more.' I have often been told that the things I am saying ... I will sit and talk to [course employee] and then a caseworker comes in, and suddenly I change the way I say things, and change my personality and such. I am not aware of it. She can see that from the outside. Then she can be good at saying, 'let's stick to the red threat here, what's important are these points here'. She is not emotionally invested the way I am, so she can keep track of it. That has been a great help.

Caseworkers ... if you are sitting and thinking that 'I am pretty blank as to what would be good for me right now'. Then caseworker will more often than not try to say, 'well, what about we try sending you out into a job placement'. And then

in reality it is not good for the person to get into a job placement, but you can't feel that yourself, because you haven't been used to putting yourself first. Or haven't been used to listening to your stomach. So you don't know that it's not a good time.

But then maybe someone at [course] has talked to you and can recognise the signs of depression, and that there are some things that you should not be pressured into doing. And you find it difficult to say no, because you have been used to it not mattering what you say. You should just follow along. So there they can say stop and say, 'maybe it is not right now you should do that. Maybe you need to focus on something else' (Sia, ID09-INT02).

The work that participants undertake in the courses, and the support they receive from employees at the course provider, have important implications for how the young people handle encounters with caseworkers. Sia uses here the phrase of 'taking yourself seriously', a phrase that comes from the course employees and that several of the course participants used in interviews to describe one of the main things they gained from participating in the course.

Learning to 'take yourself seriously' means learning to become aware of what one really wants or needs and then acting on that knowledge, rather than following other people's suggestions or perceptions of what you *should* want or need. As Sia describes, this is particularly relevant for this group of young people, who have a tendency to ignore their own needs, and instead act in the way they perceive others to want them to act. This is also the case in their relations with caseworkers.

Sia describes above what was also discussed in Chapter 7: that the young people's lack of ability to sense and articulate their own needs risks leading to people participating in activities that they are not ready for. In a later interview, Sia describes this as a process of learning to 'take up more space', in the sense of learning that it is okay to prioritise one's own wants and needs, rather than only focusing on what others would like one to do. She describes this process of finding out what truly matters to her, and to start pursuing it, as a long and difficult journey.

Interviewer: So has it helped you in the process you have been through these last six months?

Anne: A lot. It is almost things that I think should be taught in primary school. These are lessons I am going to use my whole life, and we should all get that. It has been so beneficial.

Interviewer: Can you give examples of how you use it?

Anne: We have just been through a good course on associations. About speaking your own truth and communicating what you feel in a proper way. And just this

week I have been at the job placement now, this thing about saying: 'I am tired now' or 'I can't cope with this right now'. That is a giant lesson and a giant help to have found out how to do that in a constructive manner (Anne, ID10-INT04).

Anne started at the course in a situation of severe stress, anxiety, and depression. While she was in the process of getting better, she suddenly experienced a traumatic event in her closest family, which sent her into a long period of deep grief. This also involved a brief admission to a psychiatric ward.

When she started getting better, she described how the course had been an important support for her during the difficult time, because it provided a place for her to be where nothing was required of her.

At the final interview, she was doing much better and had started a job placement within the area where she wanted to take an education and eventually develop a career. She was comfortable at the workplace, and describes in the quote above how some of the tools she has learned at the course help her function in the workplace.

She describes in particular her newfound ability to sense and express her needs in an appropriate way. The quote illustrates well the importance of psycho-social support for teaching people how to act autonomously by being able to say no to taking on tasks that they do not feel able to handle.

8.4.2. Implications for wellbeing

As described above, the young people themselves often describe how the course has had positive implications for different aspects of wellbeing, and most people describe experiencing very positive changes as a result of following the course. In some cases, people experience a dip in wellbeing at first, as they start coming to terms with their mental illness, or start processing deeper issues, and then subsequently gradual improvement over a longer period.

It has really changed me. I feel like a completely new person. I know it sounds almost cult-like, but it is just ... ok, it also has to be understood in the connection that I have been there about a year now. But for me it has been so much better than any therapy process I have had, because it is so intense. As I said, three times a week, right? You have never heard about anybody who did that with a psychologist.

And it also means that you cannot get around acting somehow. Unless you just stay away, and don't follow the course, then you can wriggle out of acting, but if you keep being confronted with having to think about, 'how am I doing? What bothers me?' All of these things, then at the end it starts taking up so much space that you have to do something. To act, so to speak. And that is a lot of what the course has done for me. A big part of it is realising that, 'I have a problem with

this'. One of my big issues has been to stand up for myself (Michael, IDo8-INTo1).

Here, Michael describes again the process of 'taking yourself seriously' and how this is very much about becoming better at acting autonomously, understood as becoming better at knowing what one wants, and perhaps particularly what one does not want, and then acting on that knowledge. The course is therefore important for people's ability to say no to things that are not aligned with their preferences.

If I am not doing anything, it scolds me for not doing anything. And if I start doing something, it scolds me for not doing it well enough or not doing enough. Or doing the wrong thing. It is almost a little comical now that I have started noticing it, that it is so extreme and far out. And very unfair. It is a bit like having a kind of devil on your shoulder, that makes sure to ruin the atmosphere when you are trying to have a good time [laughing]. It is a bit stupid (Sia, IDo9-INTo3).

In this excerpt, Sia talks about the constant feeling of inadequacy that comes from the introjected norm of having to perform in order to be accepted, but never being able to do enough. She attributes these negative thought processes to her upbringing, of never feeling accepted for being herself, but only for performing well. She describes very clearly the experience of becoming aware of these introjects, and thereby gaining the ability to distance herself from them.

Something that they emphasise a lot is structure. That means, even if you don't necessarily have anything you need to get up to do, you should get up anyway. And introducing some fixed habits and such, is also a good idea. And for many it is ... something like making your bed and drawing the curtains, that is difficult for a lot of people down there when they start.

So it is like small steps in the beginning. And then bit by bit, then ... When I started down there, I also didn't draw my curtains, because it was easier to shut the world out. But, try to introduce some things that you do daily, or at least try to do daily. And a central mantra that comes back down at [course] is this about, 'don't think woulda, coulda, shoulda' because that is what leads to a guilty consciousness, and guilty consciousness lead to fleeing. And when you are fleeing you are not tackling your problems.

But I think this woulda coulda shoulda is not something unique to us at [course]. I think it is a very common thing. But I don't think it is necessarily a good thing. Of course you have some obligations, but this about knocking yourself on the head all the time, that's not constructive (Michael, IDo8-INTo1).

In the excerpt above, Michael describes how the course works to support people to establish structure through small daily habits. In the SDT framework, the support for structure is linked to people's sense of competence, and this is

therefore an important part of helping people regain agency in their lives. Michael's description also highlights how these types of courses can counteract some of the shame and stigma that comes from feeling like a failure in terms of living up to society's expectations.

Another important aspect of the course is the ability to talk to others with similar challenges, as well as having opportunities to socialise. The course also involves social activities such as board games or walks, and the young people often form close relationships and socialise outside of the course as well. As such, for those suffering from social anxiety, the course provides a safe space for re-developing social skills and re-learning to feel comfortable among other people.

If we go all the way back to the beginning of my process with [course], if we think back to then, then I recall that my conversation with my caseworker, that was a lot about trying to get a normal everyday life, which I also mentioned earlier. But also that I wanted to try to get out into a relatively safe social place, and get some social life, and also test some things about the social world. Because that was something that I have found very difficult before, also in relation to anxiety and depressions and such. So my goal was that I really wanted to get out into a relatively safe environment, where I could test some things. And then the classes were just a bonus so to speak. So, all the things I wanted to gain from it, I feel that I have achieved. I feel that I have made a lot of progress socially and I feel that I have better relations with people than before. And it has been really good for me to have an everyday life, and to have to get up and out of the house and meet people and such during the day.

I don't recall if I mentioned it, but I have had some other attempts, where I have started education, before I started at the Jobcentre. And it has, like, gone a bit wrong the few times I have tried it, because I wasn't ready mentally, or socially, to start again, and I stopped very quickly again on the educations that I tried, because I couldn't. You know, I couldn't be in that environment, that was at the school, mentally. I couldn't be at a place where I felt that I had to perform, both socially, but of course also grade-wise. I simply couldn't handle it in my head. So there I feel a lot more ready for it today, I do (Theis, ID13-INT03).

Many of the young people describe the importance of being in a social space that does not require any kind of performance. This means both the absence of grades, but just as importantly the sense of not having to perform in a particular way in order to be included in the group, as is often the case in education institutions. As Theis describes in this excerpt, the course has in particular helped him regain a sense of competence in relation to being with other people.

As such, for people who have experienced failing at education several times, the course provides a valuable experience of how an educational institution can also be a positive experience, and can provide an environment that does not imply a constant pressure to perform.

8.4.3. Conclusions: psycho-social support as part of active labour market policies

The young people's experiences of psycho-social support speak directly to the discussion in Chapter 7 about how the young people demand a lot of themselves, how they are dominated by introjected norms of deservingness, and how they feel unable to ever do enough to be accepted. Intensive psycho-social support over a longer period can be a very effective way to start dealing with some of these very deeply ingrained issues.

The young people themselves connect this work with their ability to function in both workplaces and education. Their experiences also show how the course is able to support basic psychological needs by helping them act in more autonomous ways, improving their sense of competence, and supporting their feelings of relatedness by creating a space for interaction with other people with similar challenges. In that way, the course can counteract some of the shame and stigma involved with being outside social arenas such as education and work.

8.5. Discussion: interventions and basic psychological needs over time

In this chapter, I have presented an analysis of my research participants' experiences of job placements and courses over time. I described four different trajectory types, based on how people's sense of autonomy and competence developed over time, and how these trajectories interacted with different interventions. I subsequently analysed people's experiences of job placements, including people's motivation for participating in job placements and the implications of the placements for wellbeing. Finally, I examined how psycho-social support through courses help the young people develop their self-awareness. In this section, I will discuss these three topics in turn, drawing on the existing literature and reflecting on the theoretical expectations.

There has been limited longitudinal qualitative research on how people experience active labour market policies over time. An exception is the work by Danneris (Danneris, 2016, 2018; Danneris & Caswell, 2019), who followed a group of long-term unemployed adults in Denmark over a period of two years. Rather than identifying distinct types of trajectories, she identified different stages that people pass through at different points in time.

This may be partly because the group of long-term unemployed people aged 30-59 that she followed faced more severe barriers to employment than many of the young people in my study. While my interview participants were generally in very poor mental health when they first entered the benefits system, most in fact experienced improvement over time through especially psycho-social support interventions. Only one of my participants experienced physical health issues, and these were not so severe that it prevented the person from working. Such improvement is of course not inevitable, but its prevalence in my data is a testimony to the fact that caseworkers are able to accurately identify the young people's needs and provide relevant interventions.

Contrary to the group of young people, most long-term unemployed older adults face complex combinations of mental and physical health issues, which may be chronic, as well as social issues, and a large share of this group therefore eventually end up on disability benefits rather than in employment. In addition, while I focused on the group categorised as 'Education Ready', Danneris' research focused on those furthest away from the labour market, with challenges extending beyond unemployment. This group is less likely to make progress towards employment, and their trajectories are therefore also likely to have a less clear direction than for the group of young people in my study. As such, by the end of the Danneris' study, only two out of 25 participants had found employment (Danneris, 2018), while among my study participants, 16 out of 27 were either in education or work by the time of my last contact with them.

Danneris (2018) shows how it is indeed difficult to provide a general picture of the different trajectories of her study participants. Instead, she constructs a typology of four different types of stages: stagnation, deterioration, derailment, and progression, which can be seen as building blocks for understanding the complex ups and downs of study participants' trajectories over time. What is striking when considering the experiences of the long-term unemployed is how common the 'derailment' stage is across many of the trajectories, whereas this is comparatively rare for my interviewees. Derailment involves resignation and paralysation, with people distancing themselves from support. For most of my study participants, the main experience of derailment is the event that forces them to apply for benefits in the first place, often cases of mental illness, with the exception of the two participants who experienced the loss of close family members.

Similarly to my focus here on the importance of competence, Danneris found that "what was common, therefore, was not the specific event or programme, but the fact that mastering everyday life was necessary if they were to focus on returning to the labour market" (Danneris, 2018, p. 364). She also points out the issue of lack of structure and transparency as an impediment to

people's agency, which is part of what characterises the stages of stagnation. These issues are similar to what I have discussed in Chapter 6 about how the lack of transparency at the system level can become a barrier against people making progress.

What seems curiously absent from the narratives of the study by Danneris is the role of interventions in supporting people to make progress (Danneris & Caswell, 2019). Contrary to the experiences of my study participants, there do not seem to be effective interventions to help the older long-term unemployed with mental and physical recovery. This is similar to what studies from the UK found, identifying the absence of relevant support to be a 'shared typical experience', with courses, job placements, and job search support largely experienced by study participants as irrelevant (Wright & Patrick, 2019). The same study also describes how, in the UK, the majority of study participants in two qualitative longitudinal studies experienced "falling deeper into poverty, debt and, for many, extreme hardship" (Wright & Patrick, 2019, p. 603). The authors focus in particular on the negative impacts of sanctions for people's abilities to find employment.

While I also found cases of people not receiving relevant support, for example being trapped in long periods of stagnation, with recurrent job placements that do not lead anywhere, this was not the typical experience. Instead, I found that people were more often than not offered relevant interventions, and I am therefore able to provide a nuanced analysis of when and how people may benefit from particular interventions.

My findings are broadly in line with the literature in the tradition of Latent Deprivation Theory, showing that job placements can have positive effects on people's wellbeing. Job placements can in particular improve people's sense of competence, beneficence, and relatedness, by allowing them to make positive contributions to a workplace. This is what the original Latent Deprivation Theory describe as the value of participating in collective processes (Strandh, 2001).

However, the nature of the workplace is important for whether these benefits materialise. For example, some workplaces offer work environments that support autonomy, by allowing people to choose how to carry out a task, while others are extremely controlling. Some workplaces support competence by providing tasks that are challenging but manageable, while others provide routine tasks which are not challenging and do not offer opportunities to learn. Some workplaces offer a sense of community and being accepted as part of a team, with managers offering constructive feedback, while others may instead generate feelings of isolation.

In addition, job placements have to be meaningful in relation to the unemployed person's goals. This finding is similar to the existing studies showing that in order for activation to have positive effects on wellbeing, activities must be self-directed, meaningful, and relevant (Carter & Whitworth, 2017; Gundert & Hohendanner, 2015; Malmberg-Heimonen & Vuori, 2005; Strandh, 2001; Wulfgramm, 2011). The SDT perspective and the analysis of the young people's motivation for participating in job placements adds more nuance to this discussion. It shows when and how people see mandatory job placements as personally meaningful, and how this depends on the decision-making processes and dialogue between caseworkers and citizens. What matters is not so much whether participation in activation is described on paper as mandatory or not, but whether the conditions of participation (which activities, how much time, and when) is agreed upon in a respectful dialogue.

Beyond job placements, the analysis of the young people's trajectories highlighted in particular the essential role played by psycho-social support in aiding their recovery process. Part of this is related to the therapeutic effects of e.g. group conversations and support from psycho-education courses on improving their mental health.

In addition, in the analysis above, I have drawn on the SDT framework to highlight the importance of support that helps people improve their self-awareness, something that is essential for paving the way for entering employment and education.

There has been limited research into the use of psycho-social support programmes as part of active labour market policies, although there is some previous evidence of positive effects on both wellbeing and employment outcomes (Creed et al., 1999; Hult et al., 2018). Given the prevalence of mental health issues in particular among the young unemployed people, this is clearly an area that calls for more research.

8.6. Conclusions

In this chapter, I examined how people's experiences of wellbeing developed over time, and how these experiences were associated with life events and interventions offered by the Jobcentre. I described four ideal-typical trajectories: in and out, decreasing competence, progressive improvement, and interrupted improvement.

Overall, most study participants improved their wellbeing in the period between entering the benefits system and my final interview with them. For some, their experience was of more or less steady improvement throughout the period, while others experienced setbacks or periods of declining wellbeing along the way. For those experiencing improved wellbeing, psycho-social support courses played an essential role, sometimes complemented with job

placements once people felt ready for it. For those experiencing decreasing competence, the experience was most often one of being stuck in recurrent job placements that did not lead progress towards work or education.

As such, job placements can be useful when used strategically in ways that help people achieve their goals, but may also be damaging to people's sense of competence if they are used recurrently without leading to employment or otherwise helping people achieve their goals. As pointed out by the welfare conditionality literature, the risk of making participation in job placements mandatory under threat of sanctions is that people are forced to participate in activities that are not meaningful to them.

By analysing my study participants' motivation for participating in job placements, I found that they were in fact in most cases able to make sense of the job placement as a means to helping them achieve their goal, and that this was linked to the quality of their experiences of caseworker encounters. In the cases where people felt forced to participate in a job placement, this was associated with a lack of a trusting relationship with caseworkers.

Contrary to the classical Latent Deprivation Theory assumptions, I find that job placements do not necessarily have positive effects on wellbeing. Rather, whether they do or not depends on two key factors: whether the workplace supports basic psychological needs, and whether the job placement is meaningful in relation to the young people's goals.

Finally, courses that provide psycho-social support and psycho-education play an essential role for helping the young people with mental health issues recover. Taking a particular course provider as a case, I described in this chapter how a common experience of participants in such courses is one of improved self-awareness, and of becoming better at sensing one's own needs and wants and acting on them. This has important implications not just for the young people's wellbeing, but also for their progress towards work and education, and for the way they encounter caseworkers.

Having now analysed all the three main aspects of active labour market policies, the next chapter brings together perspectives from the existing literature, theory, and the empirical analysis presented in the preceding Chapters in a discussion of how we may move closer to a theoretical understanding of the wellbeing effects of active labour market policies.

Chapter 9: Revisiting the wellbeing effects of active labour market policies

9.1. Introduction

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that we need a better understanding of how active labour market policies affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. As described in Chapter 2, the existing literature points in different directions: the literature taking the Latent Deprivation Theory as a starting point focuses primarily on the positive effects of activation on wellbeing, while the welfare conditionality literature highlights the negative effects of conditionalities and sanctions. Meanwhile, much of the social policy literature has focused on encounters between citizens and caseworkers, but without linking this explicitly to wellbeing.

In Chapter 3, I presented a preliminary theoretical framework, with some basic propositions about how different aspects of ALMPs may affect different aspects of wellbeing, based on the existing literature and on the self-determination theory of basic psychological needs.

I subsequently used this framework as a starting point for exploring the experiences of young unemployed people in Denmark, as a case for learning more about the mechanisms and processes connecting people's experiences of ALMPs with wellbeing. I analysed these connections from several different angles: Chapter 6 looked at the policy level; Chapter 7 at the implementation processes; and Chapter 8 focused on two main types of interventions (job placements and psychosocial courses).

In this final chapter, I discuss some of the main lessons learned from the previous discussions of the existing literature, the theoretical framework, and my own empirical analyses. I first revisit the theoretical framework. Subsequently, I discuss the main contributions, the scope of the findings and, finally, key policy implications.

9.2. Revisiting the theoretical framework

Recall how the theoretical framework described in Chapter 3 distinguished between three aspects of active labour market policies: policy-related aspects, the implementation process, and the specific interventions. For each of these three aspects, the framework provided propositions about how they may potentially affect the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The empirical analysis presented in the preceding chapters showed support for the propositions described in the initial theoretical framework, but also highlighted additional factors that are important for understanding the mechanisms and processes linking ALMPs and wellbeing.

First, Chapter 7 discussed the important role that social norms play in driving people's behaviour. The specific content of these norms is negotiated in the interactions between caseworkers and citizens. However, more generally speaking, the norms exist outside the particular interaction, and reflect wider social norms of deservingness and reciprocity.

These norms are influential in shaping people's motivation for e.g. participating in activities, and therefore also for understanding the ways ALMPs affect wellbeing. Social norms should therefore be added to the framework as an aspect of the general social context of great importance for understanding how ALMPs may affect wellbeing.

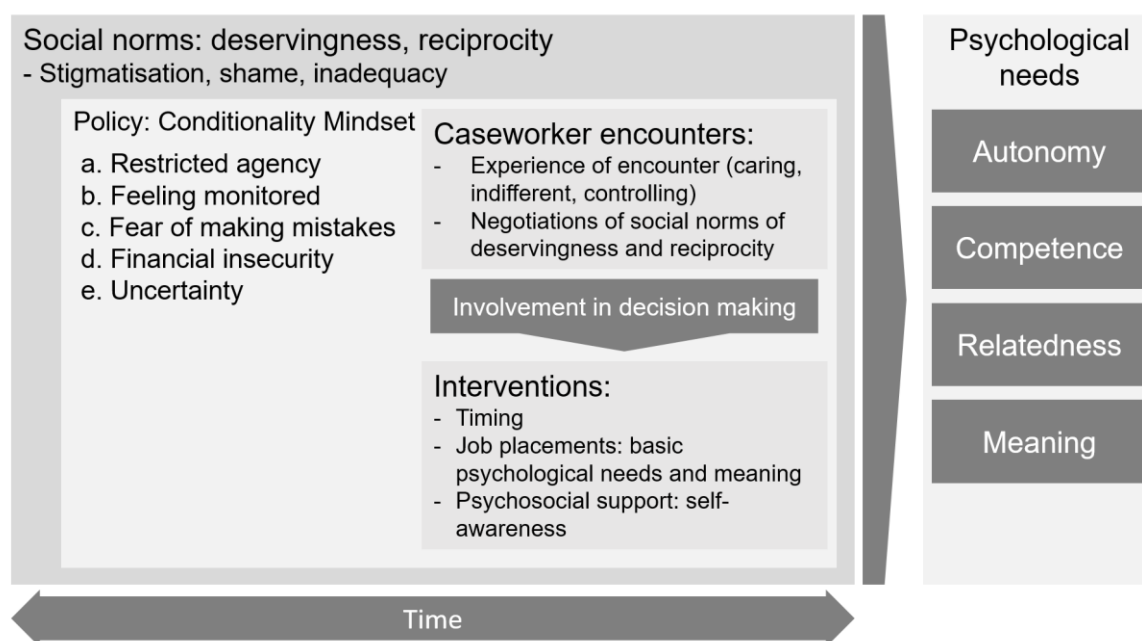
In relation to the policy aspect, I developed the concept of the Conditionality Mindset as a way to describe the general experience of living within a welfare conditionality system. In relation to the implementation process, it is important to re-consider how the social norms are negotiated in encounters between caseworkers and citizens, and the associated implications for wellbeing.

In terms of interventions, I showed that timing is an essential factor; the right intervention at the wrong time may end up setting a person back, whereas timing the intervention with careful consideration of the individual's needs at that time can be hugely beneficial.

Another addition that proved relevant, particularly in relation to the interventions, is the sense of meaning as a psychological need.

Figure 6 shows a visual representation of the revised framework. Next, I discuss some of the main additions to the framework in greater depth.

Figure 6: Aspects of active labour market policies and wellbeing



9.2.1. Social norms

Based on the analysis presented in Chapter 7, one key point is that an understanding of social norms and expectations is essential for grasping the young unemployed people's experiences. They are very concerned with doing what is expected of them, and from the way they describe their thoughts and feelings about the benefits system and meetings with caseworkers, it is clear that norms of reciprocity and deservingness are particularly important.

As discussed in Chapter 7, anthropologists and social policy scholars such as Titmuss (2018) have emphasised the pervasiveness of the social norm of reciprocity. They show that the norm of reciprocity compels people to contribute to the group, and that failing to do so is sanctioned by feelings of shame and guilt. Reciprocity is also included as one of the five criteria used to ascertain deservingness of public support according to Van Oorscot (2000). The other two criteria of particular relevance here are control over neediness, i.e. whether people are seen as responsible for their situation, and attitude, i.e. whether people are seen as compliant and conforming to expectations and standards (Van Oorscot, 2000, p. 26).

The general implication of these norms is that the young people do what they can to show that they are active. They do this by accepting the activities they are offered by caseworkers and by for example increasing the number of hours that they attend courses, or by participating in job placements – something which has also been found by other studies (Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021).

This is important in relation to wellbeing, because it means that people risk agreeing to participate in activities that they have no real interest in,

thereby undermining their sense of autonomy. For example, people risk wasting time in job placements that are not relevant to them. In the worst cases, vulnerable young people with mental illness are sent into work environments that they are unable to cope with, leading them to yet another experience of failure, and risking further deterioration of their mental health.

An implication of this is that caseworkers need to work against these norms in their meetings with the young people, if they are to ensure that the activities are aligned with the person's individual needs and wants. Further, these norms reinforce feelings of stigma and shame, as people experience not being able to live up to the norm of reciprocity. Again, from the perspective of supporting wellbeing, the implication is that ALMPs need to be designed in such a way as to counteract these negative feelings. I did find in my analysis of experiences of interventions, that for example activities which provide alternative forms of communities can achieve this, by showing people that they are accepted as members of a community, even if they are not at the moment 'contributing' to society through formal employment.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the governmentality perspective is relevant for analysing this aspect of ALMPs. There is reason to be critical of the prevalence of these norms and the way they are articulated by decision makers and through policy design, as they are clearly damaging to wellbeing. As argued by Sage (2019), rather than trying to design ALMPs to make up for the loss of status associated with unemployment, it would be more effective to widen our concept of what it means to contribute to society by challenging the centrality of employment. While the general norm of reciprocity seems to be strongly ingrained in human societies, the specific content of this norm, i.e. ideas about *how* people can contribute, may be subject to negotiation, and can be articulated in different ways through, for example, the design of active labour market policies.

9.2.2. Policy design

As described in Chapter 6, my study participants often distinguished between their experiences of 'the system' and the specific meetings and activities in which they participate. They usually had a negative impression of 'the system', which persisted despite positive experiences of encounters with caseworkers and participation in activities. As such, my findings resonate with previous studies on the phenomenon of 'bureauphobia', which seems particularly strong when it comes to ALMPs (del Pino et al., 2016).

Generally speaking, 'the system' consists of the complex set of rules and regulations that make up the ALMP system. In my analysis, I developed the concept of the Conditionality Mindset to describe the experience of living

within this system, taking inspiration from the concept of the ‘Scarcity Mindset’ (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). The Conditionality Mindset comprises five distinct aspects, or experiences, which are linked to specific characteristics of the benefits system and have certain implications for basic psychological needs and wellbeing. These are summarised in Table 16 (reproduced from Chapter 6).

Table 16: Aspects of the Conditionality Mindset, the characteristics of the system which produces them, and the outcomes in terms of basic psychological needs and wellbeing

Aspects of the conditionality mindset	Characteristics of the benefits system	Implications for basic psychological needs and wellbeing
a. Restricted agency	Lack of transparency about rights and responsibilities Passive role of citizens Limited information	Limited sense of competence
b. Being monitored	Documentation requirements Requirement to comply with demands	Sense of vulnerability Sense of being controlled/ limited sense of autonomy Sense of mistrust
c. The fear of making mistakes	Complexity of rules Unclear expectations Threat of sanctions	Anxiety Limited sense of autonomy
d. The experience of financial insecurity	Low benefit levels Limits on savings Deductions of earned income	Limited sense of competence Limited sense of autonomy
e. The experience of uncertainty	Short-term interventions Last-minute approvals of extensions Lack of long-term planning	Limited sense of competence

A key lesson from this analysis is the importance of considering how the general policy design of ALMPs may affect people negatively, even if the specific caseworker meetings and activities are positively evaluated. Similarly to the Scarcity Mindset, the Conditionality Mindset limits people’s mental bandwidth. This is particularly clear when it comes to the experience of restricted agency, something which also resonates with the welfare conditionality literature (Wright & Patrick, 2019).

Part of what causes both the restricted agency and the fear of making mistakes is the complexity of the rules and regulations (and the way they are communicated in hard-to-understand written communication), the lack of transparency about rights and responsibilities, and the threat of sanctions. These

are all issues that could potentially be addressed through policy reforms to make the legislation simpler and more transparent, and by removing the threat of sanctions for non-compliance. The benefits system is supposed to provide people with economic security, but the fact that benefits can be removed undermines this purpose. As Niels described in Chapter 6, and which is also well-documented by the welfare conditionality literature, the threat of sanctions feels like a Sword of Damocles, invoking a constant generalised sense of anxiety and lack of security.

It is paradoxical that the ALMP system include many design features that restrict the agency of benefit recipients, when the central purpose of this very system is in fact to support people's agency and make them self-reliant.

While policy design plays a part in these systemic shortcomings, which minimise agency, the issue also partly has to do with the fact that most of the participants in my case study are mentally ill young people in an unfamiliar situation. I do find a tendency for interviewees to become better at exercising their agency over time, as they become more familiar with the system and improve their mental health.

Another important factor in such positive developments is whether people can find allies to help them take a more active role, be they caseworkers, family members, or course employees. As discussed in connection with the interventions, self-awareness is also important for people's ability to both identify their own needs and then to exercise agency to advocate for ways to get these needs met. Self-awareness can be supported for example through interventions providing psycho-social support.

9.2.3. Implementation processes

In Chapter 7, I characterised the young people's experiences of the relationship with caseworkers as a relationship which is personal, reciprocal, and temporal. The main lesson here is that the relationship is governed less by specific rules and regulations, and more by social norms and expectations. The personal nature of the relationship, and the discretion which allows caseworkers to develop personal relationships with people, is perceived positively by the young people. It is also clear that this discretion is essential for ensuring processes and interventions that support wellbeing.

However, there is a dilemma here, since there are also potential negative aspects of the lack of clear rules and regulations. The fact that the way policies are implemented are less rule-based and more norm-based makes it more difficult for the young people to grasp what their rights and duties actually are, and also makes it more difficult for them to protest, since clear-cut demands are rarely formulated. This risks leaving them feeling constantly unsure about whether they have done enough to deserve support.

So, while expectations and ideals can be just as controlling and damaging to wellbeing as rules and regulations, the fact that they are more fluffy or fuzzy makes it more difficult to identify the source of the problem. It also perhaps makes it more likely that people will internalise any issues they experience – as illustrated by the many times one of the young people said something along the lines of ‘I don’t know, perhaps it’s just me’. When rules and specific demands are in place, it is clear that they are external – but with expectations and ideals, it is more difficult to distinguish between the external and the internal, since the interpretation of the situation is inherently subjective, and it is not possible to point to a specific external demand.

Overall, the findings point to the importance of the norms of reciprocity and deservingness for encounters between caseworkers and citizens. The implication is that caseworkers have to be very skilled at listening to the young people in order to identify their actual needs and wants. Training caseworkers in communication and active listening could be a helpful way to move towards this goal.

9.2.4. Interventions

Three key points emerged from the discussion of interventions, where I focused on the two main intervention types of job placements and psycho-social support courses. First, the importance of an inclusive decision-making process for ensuring that activities are meaningful and not harmful. Second, the importance of timing. It is of course important to be able to offer relevant activities, but the same activity may be harmful for one person at one point in time and beneficial for another person, or for the same person at a different time. Third, for people with mental health issues, access to psycho-social support is key.

Job placements are a very divisive type of intervention, in both the Danish public debate and the academic literature. Some see it as basically forced labour, exploiting the unemployed to provide menial work to employers for free. For others, it is the most effective intervention, because it mimics the experience of a real workplace. Interestingly, I found that the young people themselves may hold either of these views, depending on their experiences. I found that job placements can be useful when used in the right way. However, they can also easily be misused. It is therefore especially important for there to be a real dialogue in the decision-making process to ensure that the job placements are meaningful and not irrelevant or harmful.

Beyond job placements, my research shows how psycho-social support plays an essential role in supporting people to improve their mental health and wellbeing, and to move towards work and education. Psycho-social support as part of ALMPs is therefore an area that merits further research.

9.2.5. Time

People's needs change over time. Hence, an overall point is that ALMPs need to be able to respond to people's needs in the right way at the right time. This means providing the right kind of intervention, but it may also sometimes mean not pushing people to participate in any interventions.

My research shows that people experience time without activities in very different ways, depending on their situation. Again, the concept of autonomy is relevant, as people's experience of waiting time depends on whether it is something they have chosen for themselves, or something that has been imposed on them.

For example, Jack experienced a period of no activities while on sick leave as much-needed time off for reflection. This time off from activities became a turning point for him, because it gave him an opportunity to reflect on what he really wanted and the mental bandwidth he needed to plan for the future.

On the contrary, most of the young people experienced the involuntary breaks imposed upon them by COVID-19 as frustrating. They experienced this waiting time without any activities as a barrier to agency. In addition, most people experienced these imposed breaks on activities as resulting in lack of structure, lack of social life, and a feeling of not making progress towards their goals.

In general, the young people's experiences show that there is no quick fix or any particular intervention that can bring people into work or education within a short period of time. For the majority of interviewees who were suffering from mental health problems, they first had to go through a process of recovering from mental illness, something that requires time, once the illness is as severe as for most of the study participants. Once their health and well-being has improved, they are ready to start reflecting on what they want to do with their lives, and perhaps test themselves and their interests in various job placements.

Once they have passed through this process and have a better idea of what they want, they can start applying for work, which may not be so easy to find when you have limited qualifications, or they can apply to start education, with start dates usually only once or twice a year.

Again, there is bound to be periods of waiting, and it should be apparent why it can easily take several years on benefits before people in this group actually start education or enter work. We should not expect any specific intervention to be able to speed up this process and deliver results within a short time – something to keep in mind when implementing randomised controlled trials to measure the effects of short-term interventions for this group.

9.3. Contributions to the literature

9.3.1. A comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the implications of ALMPs for wellbeing

As described in Chapter 2, several literatures have examined questions that are relevant for deepening our understanding of how ALMPs affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. The literature taking Latent Deprivation Theory as a starting point has in particular examined the value of interventions. The welfare conditionality literature has examined the effects of sanctions and conditionalities at the policy level, and the broader social policy literature has examined encounters between frontline workers and citizens.

My contribution here has been to pull together findings from these different literatures, and combine them with my own empirical findings to develop a common theoretical framework. This framework covers the main aspects of ALMPs and links these different aspects explicitly to wellbeing, through the self-determination theory of basic psychological needs. As such, the framework connects the three different literatures, and the different main aspects of ALMPs into a coherent and original framework for investigating the implications of these policies on wellbeing.

The framework will aid future research by contributing to building a more coherent and iterative literature on the wellbeing effects of active labour market policies. It creates greater clarity about the processes and mechanisms that link the different aspects of ALMPs to wellbeing – for example, it makes it possible to use the wealth of social policy literature dealing with citizen agency to say something about implications of agency for wellbeing in the context of unemployment.

In constructing the framework, I have distinguished between three different aspects of ALMPs – something that is usually not made explicit in the literature – and brought them together in a comprehensive manner. As such, the framework also helps explain why the existing literature point in different directions.

9.3.2. An in-depth analysis of citizen experiences over time

There is a large literature within the street-level bureaucracy field that examines the citizen frontline worker encounter from the perspective of the frontline worker. This includes studies which have highlighted how frontline workers perceive their relationship with citizens as a personal relationship, including how they rely on the kind of relational and emotion-based logics that characterise private relationships, rather than just professional logics (Harrits, 2016; Senghaas et al., 2019; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023).

My case study contributes an in-depth analysis of what this relationship looks like from the *citizen* perspective. I find that there is a high degree of commonality between the way frontline workers perceive the relationship as personal and how citizens experience the relationships.

The encounters which are valued the most are also those that are perceived as personal; caring and warm, rather than detached and robotic. I have further shown the importance of this personal relationship for the wellbeing of vulnerable unemployed young people. This highlights the importance of focusing on providing caseworkers with both the necessary working conditions (such as sufficiently low caseloads) and the skills needed to forge positive relationships with citizens (Harrits, 2016).

The existing literature on citizen experiences of encounters with caseworkers has focused primarily on identifying different citizen strategies (Danneris & Dall, 2017; Dean, 2003; Del Roy Fletcher et al., 2016; Djuve & Kavli, 2015; H. C. Hansen & Natland, 2017; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019; Solberg, 2011a, 2011b; Toerien et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2020). What I have added to this literature is an analysis of the importance of citizen perceptions of the general social norms of reciprocity and deservingness, and how the need for relatedness guides people's behaviour.

In addition, the literature highlights the positive sides of discretion, flexibility, and personalisation of activities, and my findings support this. However, I also identify a negative side of discretion from the citizen perspective, as a lack of clarity about demands impedes agency.

My case study adds in particular to our knowledge about how to support young unemployed people with mental health issues to move closer to work and education by providing an in-depth analysis of their trajectories over time. This is a particularly vulnerable group, which is currently receiving a lot of policy attention. They are at the same time more vulnerable to the negative effects of conditionalities than other groups, because of their mental health issues, and more in need of interventions which can help them recover.

What I have shown here is how features of policy design such as the use of conditionalities and sanctions may have negative effects on the young people's experiences of agency and autonomy. However, caseworkers can do much to ameliorate the negative effects of the welfare conditionality regime. The way they approach the encounter with the young people is critical for ensuring that they get the right type of support. For young people with mental health issues, the right support will often entail some form of psycho-social course, and there is a need for more research on the role of these courses and the central part they can and should play as part of ALMPs.

9.4. Scope of the findings

9.4.1. Transferability to other policy areas and benefit types

The theoretical processes and mechanisms identified in the framework presented here are likely to be limited in scope to ALMPs. This policy area has a number of characteristics that make it different from most other areas of public service provision. First, the frontline workers have a high level of discretion in ALMPs, as a variety of different services and tools are available for them to employ. This is different than for example assessing eligibility for benefits based on a set of specific rules. A number of the mechanisms identified are tied specifically to the use of behavioural conditionalities and the threat of sanctions. Other types of welfare benefits and other policy areas, which do not involve behavioural conditionalities, are unlikely to lead to similar experiences of anxiety and restricted agency.

The asymmetric power relation between citizens and caseworkers is another characteristic often highlighted. The fact that participation in activities is mandatory and that absence may be punished with sanctions is unique to activation as a public service. This means that for example the dynamics of social norms of reciprocity are likely to be particularly important in this area. However, at the same time, it is likely that we will find negotiations based on norms of reciprocity in for example the provision of social services, where people may similarly feel that they have to agree to participate in activities in order to get what they want.

The wish to have a personal relationship with the case worker is an important feature of ALMPs, linked to the discretion of the frontline worker to make decisions of great importance to citizens, the lack of clear rules and regulations, the obligation to share personal and sensitive issues – and the need to be met by the caseworker in a flexible and personalised way. However, we may see the same dynamics in some other policy areas, for example healthcare provision, where trust in healthcare personnel is also dependent on feeling that the frontline worker is present and is practising active listening.

The kind of interventions the framework includes are partly unique to ALMPs. This is the case for job placements, which are particular in the way that they use placements at actual workplaces to pursue a number of different objectives. On the other hand, psycho-social support is also provided as part of health services.

In terms of transferability to other benefit types, the existing literature points to programme design as important for citizen experiences of welfare benefits. As such, different types of benefits may be associated with very different wellbeing effects, even within the same country, and even within the same overall policy area. A widespread argument in the literature is that

means-tested benefits are more stigmatising than universal benefits. However, other studies indicate that this matter may be more complicated than it seems, and that perhaps it is more important whether the programme design allows space for positive relations between frontline workers and citizens (Barnes et al., 2023; Sage, 2018).

In my study, I found that citizen experiences of encounters with caseworkers vary widely even within the same programme. This points to factors other than programme design as relevant, including for example professional norms and workplace culture in Jobcentres, or perhaps even individual experiences and characteristics of frontline workers. One section leader I interviewed indicated that her section had just been merged from two separate sections, and that caseworkers from each of the two sections came with different approaches – one which was focused on processing of cases, and another which was focused more on social work norms of supporting people with social issues. These different traditions seemed to be clearly reflected in the young people's experiences.

In terms of transferability of findings related to case worker citizen encounters, the variation in experiences among my interviewees means that the findings should have a relatively high degree of transferability. Whether the caseworkers are mainly experienced as caring, indifferent, or controlling is likely to vary depending on programme design and many other factors – but the mechanisms linking caseworker behaviour with wellbeing are likely to hold across benefit types. On the other hand, benefit types that do not come with behavioural conditionalities – such as for example a universal child benefit or old age pension – are unlikely to involve similar experiences of for example being monitored or dealing with complex rules.

9.4.2. Transferability to active labour market policies in other countries

I expect the mechanisms and processes identified to also be relevant for analysing citizen experiences of ALMPs in other countries, even though they may exhibit differences in policy design and institutional contexts. For example, the many studies of the experiences of welfare conditionalities in the UK indicate that the current policy context there is less conducive to positive relations between caseworkers and citizens and to interventions that are experienced as meaningful by citizens. However, the theoretical framework I have developed here is still relevant for analysing these situations, for instance it can be used to explain how the negative experiences are produced in the UK, and what the implications are for the wellbeing of benefit recipients in that country.

The anthropological work discussed in Chapter 7, as well as some of the political science work on deservingness criteria indicate that the norm of reciprocity is universal to human societies. Yet, the centrality of formal employment varies considerably across societies, sometimes with large differences in gender norms around employment, and so the dominant social norms discussed in this dissertation may vary between countries.

9.4.3. Transferability to other target groups

The case of young unemployed people in Denmark has certain unique characteristics. Yet, I expect that the mechanisms and processes will travel well to other groups; it is just that some mechanisms may be more or less important for other groups. For example, for those with no other challenges than unemployment, psycho-social support is not relevant, and they may be able to benefit from job placements from day one. However, the general point about the importance of user involvement and the relationship with caseworkers for ensuring that activities are meaningful is likely to be valid for any group.

A specific characteristic of young people, as opposed to the older unemployed, is that they are still grappling with issues of identity and finding their place in the world. They may therefore be less able to articulate their own needs and preferences than older groups, and may be more preoccupied with living up to what they perceive to be the expectations of others. Older groups may be more set in their ways and less preoccupied with complying with external demands.

Different groups may also have different goals: the young people in my target group are first and foremost oriented towards improving their mental health, and subsequently towards figuring out how they may fit into society in terms of education and work. They have a strong motivation for becoming able to comply with the norm of contributing to society and doing something significant with their lives. For other groups, notably those with chronic physical health issues or disabilities, the goal may be something entirely different (for instance, securing a disability pension).

9.4.4. Questions for future research

The questions of transferability outlined above are to some extent empirical questions. Future research may therefore include for example more comparative studies, in order to test the extent to which the proposed mechanisms and processes are relevant for other areas. This may for example involve comparisons of qualitative data from different countries, much of which is already available. For example, data on young benefit recipients in the UK are available from the WelCon project. A comparison between the WelCon data and the

data I have collected for this dissertation could serve to identify how the experiences of young unemployed people in similar situations vary with differences in policy design and implementation.

Another type of comparison that would be very relevant is between different benefit types and between different groups. The preliminary comparison between the young unemployed people with low education receiving Education Benefits and the young people in the social insurance system, with more education and less issues beyond unemployment, interviewed by Pultz (2018), show some interesting similarities with regards to the kind of social norms people orient themselves towards.

The work by Sage (2018) also shows the value of comparing citizens' experiences of different types of benefits, with different programme designs, within the same country context. Ample qualitative data on experiences of ALMPs already exist, potentially allowing for comparative research to be carried out without having to collect new data.

Finally, as I argued in the first chapter, there are several good reasons for focusing more on wellbeing as a key outcome of active labour market policies. In the current situation of low unemployment, most of the unemployed suffer from issues beyond unemployment. ALMPs must be able to address these issues if they are to help people into employment.

In addition, the trend towards broadening the use of conditionalities and sanctions to the more vulnerable unemployed underscores the pressing need for more knowledge about how these policies affect wellbeing.

Future studies should consider not only the experiences of conditionalities and sanctions, but should also focus on documenting how people experience interventions. In particular, there is a need for more research on psycho-social support as part of active labour market policies, and linkages to health services more generally.

9.5. Policy implications

A key argument throughout this dissertation has been that it is essential to focus on how active labour market policies affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. This is particularly important for vulnerable groups such as young people with mental health issues.

I have described a way to conceptualise wellbeing, and proposed some key mechanisms and processes through which different aspects of ALMPs are likely to influence different aspects of wellbeing. This framework may be used to guide policy and programme design, as well as decisions about how to organise implementation processes and interventions locally.

At the policy level, it is clear that the current system of conditionalities and sanctions has a number of counter-productive effects. The Conditionality

Mindset described in Chapter 6 is not conducive to the kind of empowerment and strengthened sense of competence that ALMPs are intended to achieve. It is not even clear that the use of conditionalities is necessary, since there are pre-existing strong norms of reciprocity guiding people's behaviour. Experiences of stigma and shame are already attached to the inability to contribute to society through work, negating the need for conditions that exacerbate these feelings and experiences.

Rather than basing the overall policy design on behavioural conditionalities, based on rational choice assumptions of behaviour, the system might better motivate people to enter education or employment by focusing on supporting basic psychological needs.

In fact, given how strong the social norm of reciprocity is, and how the sense of stigma and shame associated with unemployment undermines people's sense of agency and wellbeing, ALMPs should be designed to help ameliorate these negative feelings. This can be done for example by creating of a sense of community with others in the same situation, which the courses providing psycho-social support that I describe in Chapter 8 do.

A key point from the analysis is the need to focus on decision-making processes – which in practice means looking at the concrete meetings between caseworkers and citizens. A positive relationship is essential for ensuring that interventions support wellbeing. In practice, the Danish active labour market system provides a high level of discretion for caseworkers, who often do approach the work with unemployed citizens in ways that support basic psychological needs.

This speaks to the importance of focusing on creating the right working conditions for caseworkers to be able to forge strong relationships with citizens, for example by maintaining relatively low caseloads, and minimising the external 'system' demands that caseworkers have to navigate. It is also clear that caseworkers need training in relational skills such as for example active listening. In general, working conditions and cultures in Jobcentres should focus on the relational aspect of the work, rather than on the more task-related processing of cases.

When it comes to interventions, psycho-social support stands out as particularly important for the group of young people with mental health issues. There is clearly a need for more research on how different countries provide psycho-social support as part of their active labour market policies. In addition, this touches upon the wider discussion of how to ensure that ALMPs work together with physical and mental health interventions provided by other sectors.

Whether psychosocial support is in fact best provided as part of active labour market policies or as part of healthcare is an open question. On the one

hand, I found that it can in many cases make sense to link psycho-social support with job placements, and that the focus on working towards education and work is generally meaningful to my study participants. On the other hand, there are also experiences where the focus on work and education is experienced as a hindrance to focusing on wellbeing, and creating a sense of case-workers having a hidden agenda of pushing people towards employment, regardless of whether this is what citizens themselves find most relevant.

Regardless of where these interventions are housed, it is important that the young people have an entry point so that they can get help as soon as possible when affected by mental illness. Jobcentres act as entry points because people get in touch with them when they apply for benefits, and this often happens only after several years of mental illness. As many interviewees stated, they wished that they had gotten help much earlier. Earlier support would most likely also have shortened the period that people had to stay outside education and work. This requires a deeper examination of how education systems and labour markets can be made more inclusive, and how they can become better able to identify people with mental health issues and quickly refer them to relevant support.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

1. Projektets titel

I forbindelse med forskningsprojektet "Psychology of Welfare Conditionality among Young Unemployed People" har vi brug for dit samtykke til, at vi må behandle dine personoplysninger i overensstemmelse med Databeskyttelsesforordningen.

2. Projektbeskrivelse

Projektet følger 20-30 unge på Uddannelseshjælp over en periode på 10-12 måneder, for at finde ud af, hvordan folk oplever mødet med kommunen, og de forskellige former for aktivering man får tilbudt som arbejdsløs. I forbindelse med projekt Ungebudgetter følges 8-10 projektdeltagere i en periode på omkring 12 måneder.

Jeg vil derfor gerne mødes med dig tre gange i løbet af de næste 12 måneder for at høre mere om din oplevelse af beskæftigelsesindsatsen overordnet set, samt specifikt om din oplevelse af projekt Ungebudgetter. Det første interview vil nok vare omkring 1,5 time, mens de andre vil være kortere, sandsynligvis omkring 1 time.

3. Dataansvarlig, projektgruppe og projektleder

Aarhus Universitet, CVR nr. 31119103, er dataansvarlig for behandlingen af dine personoplysninger. PhD-studerende, Rasmus Schjødt er ansvarlig for projektet. Jeg kan kontaktes på e-mail rasmusjs@ps.au.dk eller telefon 2726 9866.

4. Kategorier af personoplysninger der behandles om dig

Vi behandler almindelige personoplysninger i form af navn og alder. Derudover behandler vi personfølsomme oplysninger i form af helbredsoplysninger.

5. Formål og Behandlingsaktiviteter

Jeg optager interviewet på diktafon. Jeg bruger interviewet til min forskning. Interviewet behandles fortroligt og anonymt, dvs. din identitet vil ikke kunne afsløres. Mens jeg laver mine analyser, gemmer jeg optagelsen på min computer, der har kodeord. Herefter gemmer jeg optagelsen på et sikkert computerdrev på universitetet.

6. Eventuelle modtagere eller kategorier af modtagere af personoplysningerne

Jeg deler ikke dine personoplysninger med nogen.

7. Overførsel til Tredjeland eller International Organisation

Jeg overfører ikke dine personoplysninger til nogen uden for EU/EØS.

8. Opbevaringstid

Jeg opbevarer dine personoplysninger indtil mit projekt er afsluttet, hvilket jeg forventer er senest ved udgangen af 2022.

9. Mulighed for at trække samtykke tilbage

Deltagelse er frivilligt og du kan til enhver tid trække dit samtykke til behandling af personoplysninger tilbage. Dette kan ske ved at kontakte mig på enten e-mail rasmusjs@ps.au.dk eller telefon 2726 9866. Hvis du tilbagetrækker dit samtykke får det først virkning fra dette tidspunkt og påvirker ikke lovligheden af vores behandling op til dette tidspunkt.

Underskrift

Jeg bekræfter at have modtaget, læst og forstået ovenstående, som baggrund for mit samtykke til behandling af mine personoplysninger til følgende formål:

Formål: Jeg bruger dine oplysninger til analyse i forbindelse med PhD-projektet "Psychology of Welfare Conditionality among Young Unemployed People" samt i forbindelse med evaluering af projekt Ungebudgetter.

(underskrift og dato)

Appendix B: Interview guide, in-depth interviews with young unemployed people

Oversigt over interviewguidens temaer og hovedspørgsmål:

1. Baggrund
 - 1.1 Opvækst
 - 1.2 Skole
 - 1.3 Arbejde
2. Beskrivelse af krav/sanktioner
 - 2.1 Beskrivelse af at være på uddannelseshjælp
 - 2.2 Beskrivelse af krav
3. Autonomi
 - 3.1 Generel følelse af autonomi
 - 3.2 Autonomi i mødet med Jobcentret
4. Kompetence
 - 4.1 Generel følelse af kompetence i forhold til hverdagen
 - 4.2 Jobcentrets indflydelse på følelse af kompetence
5. Samhørighed
 - 5.1 Forhold til sagsbehandler
6. Motivation
 - 6.1 Fremtidsplaner
 - 6.2 Motivation for at søge job/uddannelse
 - 6.3 Motivation for at deltage i møder/aktivering
7. Økonomi

Introduktion

Interviewet kan evt. forberedes med en første uformel samtale over en kop kaffe eller en sandwich, hvor jeg fortæller om projektets formål og hvad deltagelse vil indebære, og hvor interviewpersonen kan fortælle lidt om dem selv, så jeg også kan sikre mig at de falder indenfor målgruppen. Selve interviewet kan finde sted i umiddelbar forlængelse af det første møde, eller en anden dag.

Hej, og tusind tak fordi du vil deltage, det er jeg meget glad for.

Jeg hedder Rasmus, og er ph.d.-studerende ved Aarhus Universitet. Formålet med mit Ph.d.-projekt er, at få mere viden om, hvordan unge oplever at være på Uddannelseshjælp.

Inden vi går i gang vil jeg lige kort fortælle om hvad jeg tænker vi skal snakke om, og hvad jeg gerne vil have din hjælp til.

Min idé med projektet er følge 20-30 unge på Uddannelseshjælp over en periode på 3-6 måneder, for at finde ud af, hvordan folk oplever mødet med kommunen, og de forskellige former for aktivering man får tilbudt som arbejdsløs. Det handler også om at finde ud af, hvad der opleves som godt og hvad der opleves som dårligt.

Jeg vil derfor gerne mødes med dig ca. hver anden måned, for at høre om dine oplevelser af 'systemet'. Det første interview vil nok vare omkring 2 timer, mens de andre vil være kortere, sandsynligvis omkring 1 time.

I det første interview vil jeg i første omgang stille nogle spørgsmål omkring din baggrund og derefter specifikt omkring din oplevelse af kommunens indsats. Det kan godt være det bliver lidt personligt nogle gange, og du må endelig sige til, hvis der er noget du ikke har lyst til at svare på, så går vi bare videre. Til slut vil jeg bede dig om at udfylde et spørgeskema med nogle baggrundsspørgsmål.

Jeg optager interviewet på diktafon. Jeg bruger interviewet til min forskning. Interviewet behandles fortroligt og anonymt, dvs. din identitet vil ikke kunne afsløres. Mens jeg laver mine analyser, gemmer jeg optagelsen på min computer, der har kodeord. Herefter gemmer jeg optagelsen på et sikkert computerdrev på universitetet.

[Underskriv samtykke]

1. Baggrund

1.1 Allerførst vil jeg gerne høre lidt om dig og din baggrund. Vil du lægge ud med at fortælle mig lidt om din opvækst?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Hvor er du vokset op?
- Er du vokset op med begge dine forældre?
- Hvad laver/lavede dine forældre?
- Var det en tryk opvækst? Vil du sige at du har haft en god/lykkelig barndom og ungdom?

- Hvornår flyttede du hjemmefra? Hvor flyttede du så til?

1.2 Kan du fortælle lidt om din oplevelse med at gå i skole?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Hvordan var din oplevelse af folkeskolen?
- Oplevede du at blive mobbet?
- Skiftede du ofte skole?
- Hvordan var din relation til de andre elever og til lærerne? (Kan du give eksempler på gode og dårlige oplevelser med lærere?)
- Var der noget du godt kunne lide ved at gå i skole?
- Har du været i gang med og/eller færdiggjort en ungdomsuddannelse?
- Hvad med videregående uddannelse?

1.3 Hvad er din erfaring med arbejdsmarkedet? Har du haft arbejde?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Fuldtids/deltidsarbejde?
- Hvordan var din oplevelse af arbejdet?
- Kan du give eksempler på gode og dårlige oplevelser?

2. Beskrivelse af krav og sanktioner

2.1. Kan du fortælle mig om, hvad der gjorde at du søgte om uddannelseshjælp?

- Hvordan ansøgte du om støtte?
- Hvad skete der så?
- Hvordan oplevede du det første møde? Hvad snakkede I om?
- Ved du om du er kategoriseret som uddannelsesparat eller aktivitetsparat?
- Hvordan oplevede du ansøgningsskemaet, hvor man søger om støtte – inklusiv kravene om dokumentation?

2.2. Hvordan har dit forløb været indtil videre?

- Hvordan og hvem er du i kontakt med fra kommunen? Har du en mentor og/eller bostøtte eller fast kontaktperson?
- Hvor tit har du møder med Jobcentret? Hvad taler I om på møderne?
- Har der været andre aktiviteter fra kommunen som du har deltaget i? [få så præcis en beskrivelse som muligt af deres forløb indtil videre]

2.3 Ved du, hvilke krav du skal leve op til for at fortsætte med at få den støtte du får nu?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Føler du at du har fået en god vejledning i hvad kravene er?
- Hvad sker der, hvis du ikke lever op til kravene?

2.4 Hvad har din oplevelse været af at have med kommunen at gøre indtil videre?

[Disse spørgsmål relateres til de konkrete aktiviteter beskrevet ovenfor]

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Føler du at de aktiviteter du har fået tilbudt har givet mening for dig?
- Hvordan oplevede du [specifik del af forløbet nævnt tidligere].
- Kan du give nogle eksempler på situationer, som du har været utilfreds med?
- Føler du at du er blevet behandlet fair?

5.1. Føler du at de samtaler og de aktiviteter du har deltaget i har hjulpet dig med at komme videre i dit liv?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Hvad har været det bedste ved [forskellige former for aktivering]? Hvad har været det værste?

3 Autonomi

3.1 Føler du generelt, at du har mulighed for at bruge din tid som du har lyst til for tiden?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- På hvilken måde føler du at du har frihed til selv at tilrettelægge din tilværelse?
- På hvilken måde har du ikke frihed til selv at bestemme?
- Er der nogen ting du gerne ville gøre anderledes, hvis du kunne?
- Hvad er barriererne for at du kan opnå de ting du gerne vil med dit liv?
- Hvad kan du selv gøre for at opnå disse ting?

3.2 Tænk på de første møder med Jobcentret. Oplevede du, at du selv havde indflydelse på den plan der blev lavet?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Føler du at du selv har indflydelse på, hvad der skal ske i din sag?
- Føler du, at du får nok information om, hvad der sker i din sag?
- Hvad er det der har gjort at du føler at du selv kan bestemme/at du ikke selv kan bestemme hvad der skal ske? (f.eks. noget sagsbehandleren har sagt eller gjort).
- Føler du, at Jobcentret har givet dig flere valgmuligheder – eller færre?
- Føler du, at Jobcentret er en hjælp eller en forhindring i forhold til, at nå de mål du gerne vil i dit liv?

4 Kompetence

4.1 Er der nogle ting i dit liv som du føler du har svært ved at magte for tiden?

- Føler du generelt, at du er i stand til at klare de udfordringer du møder i dit liv?
- Føler du at du kan starte og gennemføre en uddannelse eller finde og passe et arbejde?
- Hvorfor, hvorfor ikke?

4.2 Føler du at du har fået sværere eller lettere ved at håndtere disse ting efter du er begyndt at modtage uddannelseshjælp? Har Jobcentret været en hjælp i den forbindelse? Har det været en belastning?

- Tænk på det sidste møde med Jobcentret, følte du dig bedre klædt på til at klare de udfordringer du møder i dit liv?
- Føler du at du forstår de krav du bliver mødt med fra Jobcentret?
- Føler du at den kommunikation du får fra Jobcentret er konsistent?
- Er der nogle bestemte ting i dit liv som du føler er svære at håndtere? Har du fået nemmere eller sværere ved at håndtere dem som følge af de aktiviteter du har deltaget i mens du har været på uddannelseshjælp?

5 Samhørighed

5.1 Hvordan er dit forhold til din sagsbehandler?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Har du haft en fast sagsbehandler, eller har der været mange forskellige?
- Hvad oplever du som godt i forholdet til sagsbehandleren? Hvad oplever du som dårligt?
- Føler du dig 'set' af din sagsbehandler? Er han/hun godt forberedt til møderne – kan han/hun huske hvem du er, og hvad I har talt om tidligere?
- Er der tid nok til møderne?
- Føler du at din sagsbehandler lytter til dig? Forstår dig?
- Hvad er din sagsbehandlers primære rolle i forhold til dig (om nødvendigt, uddyb spørgsmålet: skal han/hun kontrollere om du lever op til kravene, eller hjælpe dig med at finde den rigtige uddannelse?)
- Har dit forhold til sagsbehandleren ændret sig over tid? Hvorfor tror du forholdet har ændret sig?

6. Motivation

6.1 Hvad er dine planer for fremtiden?

- Hvorfor er du interesseret i lige præcis den uddannelse eller det job?
- Fordi du tænker det kunne være interessant i sig selv?
- Fordi du tænker at det vil føre til et job som er interessant? Eller fordi du tænker du vil få en højere indkomst?
- Fordi du føler at man bør have en uddannelse eller et job?
- Fordi du er nødt til at tjene penge for at leve?

- Hvad betyder mest for dig når du tænker over hvad du gerne vil beskæftige dig med i fremtiden? At det du laver skal være meningsfyldt? At du gerne vil have en høj løn? At det skal være udfordrende/lærerigt? Andet?

6.2 Hvad gør du for at nå dine mål?

- Søger du aktivt efter uddannelse/jobs?
- Hvor ofte/hvor mange om ugen?
- Hvorfor, hvorfor ikke?

6.3 Hvorfor har du deltaget i [forskellige former for aktivering]?

- Fordi det er interessant i sig selv?
- Fordi du ellers ville miste din uddannelseshjælp?
- Fordi det på sigt kan føre til uddannelse og/eller job?
- Fordi det er din pligt som borger?

7. Økonomi

7.1 Kan du fortælle mig om din økonomiske situation?

Opfølgende spørgsmål:

- Hvor meget får du i ydelse?
- Er det nok til at dække dine behov?
- Er der nogen ting du ikke har råd til?
- Har du gjort noget for at tilpasse dig til livet på uddannelseshjælp?
- Har du oplevet at blive trukket i din ydelse?
- Er du nogensinde nervøs for at kommunen skal trække dig i ydelse?
- Har der været nogle tidspunkter, hvor du har været mere bekymret over dette? (f.eks. før eller efter møder, eller efter at have modtaget breve fra kommunen).

Afslutning

Jeg har ikke flere spørgsmål. Har du noget, du gerne vil tilføje, uddybe eller spørge om, inden vi afslutter interviewet?

Jeg kunne godt tænke mig at høre din umiddelbare respons på interviewet omkring spørgsmålene? Var der noget, der var uklart eller uforståeligt?

Ellers vil jeg bare sige mange tak fordi du tog tid til at deltage – du har været en stor hjælp. Tak!

Appendix C: Interview guide, key informant interviews, caseworkers

Introduktion

Kort om mit projekt: jeg er i gang med et PhD-projekt om arbejdsløse unges oplevelse af beskæftigelsesindsatsen. Jeg har fulgt en gruppe på 18 unge i omkring et år, og følger stadig en anden gruppe af 9 unge deltagere i projekt ungebudgetter. Interviewet bidrager både til mit overordnede PhD-projekt samt til evalueringen af projekt ungebudgetter.

Formålet med interviewet er at få et grundigt kendskab til den måde beskæftigelsesindsatsen for de uddannelsesparate unge foregår på i Aarhus kommune – dvs. både den formelle organisering af arbejdet, og den mere uformelle tilgang til arbejdet fra ledere og frontmedarbejdere.

Jeg optager, men det er anonymt og bliver ikke delt med nogen.

1. Jobfunktion og baggrund

Jobfunktion

- Kan du starte med at fortælle mig lidt om hvad dit arbejde går ud på? Hvad er din rolle?
 - o Formel titel
 - o Overordnet beskrivelse af arbejdsopgaver
- Kan du beskrivelse hvordan en typisk arbejdsdag ser ud for dig?
- Hvilken afdeling er du placeret i? Hvor mange kollegaer er I i afdelingen?

Personlig baggrund

- Kan du fortælle mig lidt om din baggrund? Hvor mange års erfaring har du? Hvor længe har du arbejdet i din nuværende rolle? Hvor var du tidligere (evt. anden rolle i organisationen eller job i anden organisation).
- Hvilke uddannelse har du?
- Hvad arbejdede du med før du blev ansat i din nuværende rolle?

2. Projekt ungebudgetter

- Hvordan kom du med i projektet?
- Hvorfor valgte du at deltage?
 - o Hvad tænkte du var spændende ved projektet?
 - o Hvilke værdi tænkte du det kunne tilføre dit arbejde?
 - o Havde du nogle bekymringer?
- Hvilke aktiviteter har der været omkring projektet? Har I haft nogle fælles træninger, møder eller workshop omkring hvordan I kan arbejde med ungebudgetterne?
- Hvilken tilgang har du haft til at snakke med de unge om projektet?
- Hvilken ramme har du italesat for hvad pengene kan bruges til?

- Hvordan oplever du de unge har reageret på projektet? Synes du de har haft gode idéer til hvordan pengene kunne bruges?
- Hvad har de unge fået ud af projektet indtil videre? Hvad har de brugt pengene til?
- Hvordan er dette tilbud anderledes end de andre tilbud du har til de unge?
- Har du brugt ungebudgetterne til at arbejde med andre ting end de rent monetære, f.eks. de unges følelse af ejerskab over deres liv?

3. Møderne med de unge

- Kan du beskrive et typisk første møde med en ung?
- Er der en bestemt dagsorden eller struktur I følger?
- Er der elementer, der skal indgå på møderne eller er det op til dig selv hvad indholdet er?
- Hvordan foregår den løbende opfølgning, herunder efterfølgende møder?
- Hvad er formålet med møderne med de unge typisk?
- Hvor meget lægger fylder ret og pligt-reglerne på møderne?
- Hvordan bruger du Min Plan? Er der andre værktøjer der bruges?
- Hvilke teknikker eller tilgange bruger du for at forstå de unges behov og præferencer? Kræver det noget særligt at få dem til at åbne op?
- Hvordan besluttet det hvad der skal ske i sagen – er det din, de unges eller en fælles beslutning? Hvordan besluttet det f.eks. hvilke tilbud de unge skal have?

4. Skriftlig kommunikation

- Hvordan bruger I den skriftlige kommunikation i praksis? Er det standardskrivelser, eller personlige beskeder? Sender I dem personligt, eller sker det automatisk?
- Er det dit indtryk at de unge læser den skriftlige kommunikation?
- Oplever du at de unge forstår den skriftlige kommunikation?
- Oplever du at de unge udtrykker frustration over den skriftlige kommunikation overfor dig?
- Sker det at du hjælper de unge med at forstå den skriftlige kommunikation?
- Hvad er din egen opfattelse af kvaliteten af den skriftlige kommunikation? Opfylder den sit formål?

5. Ressourcer

Tid

- Hvor mange unge har du normalt i din sagsstamme?
- Oplever du det som mange eller få – eller lige tilpas?
- Hvor ofte har du kontakt til dem? (varierer det meget – mellem individuelle borgere og over tid?)

- Føler du, at du har tid nok til hver borger og til den personlige kontakt med de unge?
- Føler du at antallet af sager er passende i forhold til
- Hvilke opgaver bruger du tid på udover selve kontakten med de unge?

Redskaber/værktøjer/indsatser

- Hvilke tilbud benytter du mest til dine unge?
- Føler du, at du har de rigtige værktøjer til at hjælpe de unge med deres behov?
- Er de rette indsatser til rådighed? Har du kendskab til hvilke indsatser der findes og hvordan de unge får adgang til dem? Er der som regel plads på de relevante tilbud?
- Er der en målsætning om at de unge skal være i tilbud det meste af tiden?
- Hvad er formålene med de forskellige tilbud? (F.eks. virksomhedspraktik)
- Er de forskellige tilbud målrettet forskellige målgrupper?
- Har de unge mulighed for selv at identificere tilbud?
- Er det obligatorisk for de unge at sige ja til tilbud? Sker det at unge sanktioneres for at sige nej til f.eks. virksomhedspraktik?
- Hvordan sikrer I at de unge får det rigtige tilbud – dvs. dels det de har behov for, for at komme videre, men også det rigtige match mellem deres evner og tilbuddets krav (igen, f.eks. virksomhedspraktik).
- Har du/I (uddannelseskonsulenter og virksomhedskonsulenter) de rette faglige kompetencer til at hjælpe de unge? F.eks. i forhold til uddannelses-vejledning?
- Tilbud – hvilke tilbud gives til hvem? Hvilke faktorer har indflydelse på hvem der får hvilke tilbud? Alene borgernes behov, eller er der også begrænsede pladser/økonomiske hensyn at tage?

6. Oplevelse af de unge

- Hvilke udfordringer har de unge typisk når du møder dem?
 - o Er der forskellige grupper af unge med forskellige udfordringer? Er der nogle mønstre i hvilke oplevelser de har?
 - o Er de reelt klar til at starte uddannelse indenfor et år?
- Hvilke behov oplever du at de har?
- Hvilke behov giver de udtryk for? Kender de deres egne reelle behov?
- Er de nemme at komme i kontakt med? (Kontakter de dig?)
- Er de glade for at komme til møderne og deltage i tilbuddene, eller er det noget de modvilligt accepterer? Er de motiverede for at deltage i tilbud? Er de motiverede for at komme i uddannelse eller arbejde?
- Oplever du at de har tillid til dig?
- Oplever du at de nemt føler sig presset, hvis du stiller krav til dem?
- Hvordan arbejder du med balancen mellem at stille krav, uden at stresser dem?
- Hvor går de oftest hen når du slipper dem? I uddannelse, arbejde eller noget tredje?
- Oplever du at de fleste bliver hjulpet af de tilbud de får?

- Hvad oplever du virker positivt for de unge (for hvem, hvornår) og hvornår oplever du at det går galt? Er der bestemte mønstre i forhold til:
 - o Hvilke tilbud, der fungerer godt og hvilke der fungerer mindre godt?
 - o Hvilke unge der kommer godt videre, og hvilke der ikke gør?
 - o Bestemte typer af match mellem unge og tilbud på forskellige tidspunkter i forløbet?

7. Intern sparring og vejledning

- Er der nogen form for mundtlig eller skriftlig vejledning i jeres arbejde med borgerne?
- Har du deltaget i nogen form for træning eller efteruddannelse (eller bare sparings-forløb) omkring afholdelse af møderne med de unge?
- Har de i unge, job og uddannelse arbejdet specifikt med borgerinddragelse og samtalen med borgerne?
- Er der en fælles specifik tilgang til arbejdet med borgerne? Er der træningsforløb eller sparring for medarbejderne? Eller er det op til hver medarbejder, hvordan de håndterer mødet med borgerne?

8. Forvaltningen af krav og sanktioner

Hvilke krav stilles der til gruppen af uddannelsesparate unge?

- Krav om deltagelse i møder med sagsbehandlere – telefonisk eller fysisk?
- Krav om deltagelse i aktiviteter, f.eks. virksomhedspraktik eller kurser.
- Krav om jobsøgning? Et specifikt antal jobs?
- Krav om søgning af uddannelse? Udarbejdelse af plan for uddannelse?
- Krav om arbejde – 225-timers reglen

Sanktioner

- Hvilke regler gælder for sanktioner? Hvem er ansvarlig for implementeringen? Hvordan er klagemulighederne?
- Hvordan implementeres de i praksis? Sker det ofte at unge sanktioneres?
- Oplever du at det at der stilles krav, og at der kan sanktioneres påvirker de unges forhold til dig?

Er der undtagelser fra disse krav eller gælder de ens for alle?

- Hvor meget fleksibilitet har I til at fravige kravene, eller på anden vis beslutte, hvordan de skal implementeres? (m.a.o. hvilke krav er ufravigelige og hvilke er fleksible?)
- Er der forskellige krav for forskellige grupper?

Hvilken rolle spiller de eksterne aktører i håndhævelsen af kravene?

- Er der en konkret vejledning til dem i forhold til håndhævelse af kravene? Eller har de fleksibilitet til at gøre det på deres egen måde?
- Kan de stille forskellige krav til forskellige unge, f.eks. i forhold til mødepligt?

Hvordan og hvornår kommunikeres kravene til de unge?

- Skriftlig kommunikation

- Mundtlig kommunikation, telefonisk og fysisk
- Er der bestemte regler for hvordan og hvornår kravene skal kommunikeres?
- Har I gjort jer nogle tanker om hvordan kravene kommunikeres? Bliver det f.eks. kommunikeret som håndfaste krav i samtalerne med de unge?

Appendix D: List of study participants

ID	Alias	Sex	Age	Mental illness/ impairment	Education	Recruitment channel	Number of interviews
IDo1	Lærke	F	18	Yes	Completed primary	Municipality	2
IDo2	Thomas	M	23	No	Completed secondary	Municipality	5
IDo3	Signe	F	26	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	4
IDo4	Peter	M	23	No	Completed secondary	Municipality	2
IDo5	Jack	M	27	Yes	Completed primary	Municipality	4
IDo6	Astrid	F	26	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	1
IDo7	Ida	F	23	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
IDo8	Michael	M	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
IDo9	Sia	F	24	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID10	Anne	F	22	Yes	Completed secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID11	Lotte	F	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Neighbouring municipality	1
ID12	Jesper	M	25	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 2	2
ID13	Theis	M	22	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Course provider 1	4
ID14	Christian	M	29	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 2	2
ID15	Troels	M	24	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 3	1
ID16	Niels	M	29	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Course provider 1	4
ID17	Bo	M	23	Yes	Interrupted primary ed.	Course provider 2	4
ID18	Julie	F	25	Yes	Completed primary	Course provider 2	2
UBo1	Ellen	F	23	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UBo2	Pelle	M	28	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Municipality	2

UBo3	Jane	F	25	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UBo4	Frederik	M	27	Yes	Interrupted higher ed.	Municipality	1
UBo5	Sarah	F	25	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Municipality	1
UBo6	Thor	M	28	No	Completed primary	Municipality	2
UBo7	Oscar	M	19	Yes	Interrupted primary	Municipality	3
UBo8	Clara	F	23	Yes	Completed secondary	Municipality	3
UBo9	Alfred	M	25	Yes	Interrupted secondary	Municipality	3

Appendix E: List of interviews

ID	INT No.	Alias	Group	Date
IDo1	INTo1	Lærke	1	08.06.2020
	INTo2	Lærke	1	11.09.2020
IDo2	INTo1	Thomas	1	01.06.2020
	INTo2	Thomas	1	24.09.2020
	INTo3	Thomas	1	15.12.2020
	INTo4	Thomas	1	04.03.2021
	INTo5	Thomas	1	15.07.2021
IDo3	INTo1	Signe	1	24.09.2020
	INTo2	Signe	1	19.12.2020
	INTo3	Signe	1	11.03.2021
	INTo4	Signe	1	30.08.2021
IDo4	INTo1	Peter	1	25.09.2020
	INTo2	Peter	1	17.12.2020
IDo5	INTo1	Jack	1	09.10.2020
	INTo2	Jack	1	16.12.2020
	INTo3	Jack	1	26.03.2021
	INTo3	Jack	1	15.07.2021
IDo6	INTo1	Astrid	1	16.10.2020
IDo7	INTo1	Ida	1	21.10.2020
	INTo2	Ida	1	07.01.2021
	INTo3	Ida	1	21.04.2021
	INTo4	Ida	1	23.08.2021
IDo8	INTo1	Michael	1	22.10.2020
	INTo2	Michael	1	22.12.2020
	INTo3	Michael	1	13.04.2021
	INTo4	Michael	1	28.08.2021
IDo9	INTo1	Sia	1	23.10.2020
	INTo2	Sia	1	12.01.2020
	INTo3	Sia	1	14.04.2021
	INTo4	Sia	1	09.09.2021
ID10	INTo1	Anne	1	26.10.2020
	INTo2	Anne	1	26.01.2021
	INTo3	Anne	1	28.04.2021
	INTo4	Anne	1	08.10.2021

ID11	INT01	Lotte	1	28.10.2020
ID12	INT01	Jesper	1	05.11.2020
	INT02	Jesper	1	20.01.2021
ID13	INT01	Theis	1	10.11.2020
	INT02	Theis	1	12.01.2020
	INT03	Theis	1	14.04.2021
	INT04	Theis	1	01.09.2021
ID14	INT01	Christian	1	10.11.2020
	INT02	Christian	1	15.04.2021
ID15	INT01	Troels	1	11.11.2020
ID16	INT01	Niels	1	11.11.2020
	INT02	Niels	1	13.01.2020
	INT03	Niels	1	15.04.2021
	INT04	Niels	1	27.08.2021
ID17	INT01	Bo	1	12.11.2020
	INT02	Bo	1	13.01.2020
	INT03	Bo	1	21.04.2021
	INT04	Bo	1	31.08.2021
ID18	INT01	Julie	1	17.12.2020
	INT02	Julie	1	20.07.2021
UB01	INT01	Ellen	2	06.07.2021
	INT02	Ellen	2	11.02.2022
	INT03	Ellen	2	31.08.2022
UB02	INT01	Pelle	2	07.07.2021
	INT02	Pelle	2	03.03.2022
UB03	INT01	Jane	2	08.07.2021
	INT02	Jane	2	05.03.2022
	INT03	Jane	2	23.08.2022
UB04	INT01	Frederik	2	09.07.2021
UB05	INT01	Sarah	2	12.07.2021
UB06	INT01	Thor	2	13.07.2021
	INT02	Thor	2	05.03.2022
UB07	INT01	Oscar	2	13.07.2021
	INT02	Oscar	2	09.02.2022
	INT03	Oscar	2	23.08.2022

UBo8	INTo1	Clara	2	14.07.2021
	INTo2	Clara	2	09.02.2022
	INTo3	Clara	2	01.09.2022
UBo9	INTo1	Alfred	2	14.07.2021
	INTo2	Alfred	2	10.02.2022
	INTo3	Alfred	2	23.08.2022

Appendix F: Transcription guide

The transcription should start from the beginning of the audio recording.

Each sentence or paragraph (questions and answers) should begin with the time stamp and 'I' for interviewer and 'R' for respondent.

Recordings should be transcribed word-for-word to the extent possible. Sounds (ehm and mhm) can be left out in the cases where they are part of the normal way the persons speak. However, they should be included in those instances where they indicate that the person is in doubt about how to answer, or other cases where they are significant of the interpretation of what is said.

Interjected supportive communication from the interviewer ('ok', 'yes', 'mhm' etc.) to encourage interviewees to continue speaking should not be transcribed unless perceived by interviewees as a form of question (as in 'ok?').

Annotation guide:

- Words should generally be spelled with the correct spelling, not as pronounced.
- Unfinished sentences are marked with '..'
- Short breaks are marked with '...'
- Long breaks are marked with [pause]
- If a particular word is emphasized, write it in italics.
- Other things of relevance to the conversation should be included in square brackets, e.g. [laughing].
- If people are quoting others, use quotation marks.
- If you are in doubt about how to spell something, e.g. places names, write [st] after the word.
- If it is unclear what is being said, write [ut].

Appendix G: Coding lists

First round of closed coding

Heading	Codes	Sub-codes
1. System	1.1. Experiencing the system	1.1.1 Talk about the System
		1.1.2 Prior perceptions of jobcentre
		1.1.3 Documentation
		1.1.4 Exiting benefits
	1.2. System-Autonomy	1.2.1 Surveillance
		1.2.2 Having to be available
		1.2.3 Having to justify actions
		1.2.4 Taking action
	1.3. System-Competence	1.3.1 Understanding rules
		1.3.2 Long-term planning
2. Process	2.1. Case worker experience	2.1.1 Positive case worker experiences
		2.1.2 Negative case worker experiences
	2.2. Motivation	2.2.1 Norms and expectations
		2.2.2 Motivation for job search
		2.2.3 Motivation for work
		2.2.4 Motivation for education
3. Interventions	3.1. Job placements	3.1.1 Motivation for job placements
		3.1.2 Experiences of job placements
	3.2. Psycho-education courses	3.2.1 Experiences of courses
		3.2.2 Awareness
		3.2.3 Confusion
4. Individual characteristics	4.1. Background	4.1.1 Family history
		4.1.2 Work history
		4.1.3 Education history
	4.2. Health	4.2.1 Physical health
		4.2.2 Mental health
	4.3. Close relationships	4.3.1 Friendships
		4.3.2 Family
		4.3.3 Mentors
	4.4. Values	4.4.1 Work ethics
		4.4.2 Life goals
		4.4.3 Parental expectations
		4.4.4 Fairness

Second round closed coding

Codes	Sub-codes	Description
1. Experiences of the system	1.1. Descriptions of 'the system'	Any reference to thoughts, opinions or emotions related to 'the system', 'the municipality' or 'the jobcentre'
	1.2. Anticipating the system	Any reference to thoughts, opinions or emotions related to 'the system', 'municipality' or 'jobcentre' prior to applying for benefits.
	1.3. Restricted agency	Any reference to experiences of ownership of or control over decisions and whether activities are aligned with own interests and preferences.
	1.4. Being monitored	Any reference to experiences of being monitored, including having to provide documentation or information or documenting attendance.
	1.5. Fear of making mistakes	Any reference to fear of making mistakes, including fear of being sanctioned.
	1.6. Financial insecurity	Any reference to economic situation.
	1.7. Uncertainty	Any reference to thoughts, plans and worries about the future.
	1.8. Exiting the system	Any reference to the experience of exiting benefits.
2. Case worker experiences	2.1. Contact with caseworkers	Any reference to thoughts about the frequency and nature of contact with caseworkers.
	2.2. Trust and mistrust	Any reference to trust or mistrust in caseworkers
	2.3. Caring caseworkers	Any reference to positive evaluations of caseworkers, including caring, trusting, listening, feeling understood.
	2.4. Indifferent caseworkers	Any reference to caseworkers as indifferent, not showing an interest or being involved in the relationship.
	2.5. Controlling caseworkers	Any reference to caseworkers trying to pressure people to behave in certain ways, or being described as controlling.
	2.6. Experiences of demands	Any reference to demands or requirements by caseworkers.
	2.7. Social norms in caseworker encounters	Any references to expectations about behaviour in the caseworker encounter
	2.8. Experiences of decision making	Any reference to decision making processes in meetings with caseworkers.

3. Job placements	3.1. Intrinsic motivation	Any reference to doing job placements because the activity has value, or is experienced as joyful, in itself.
	3.2. Integrated motivation	Any reference to doing job placements because it is important for oneself, even if the activity is not in itself joyful.
	3.2. Identified motivation	Any reference to doing job placements because they are seen as meaningful in relation to achieving one's objectives.
	3.3. Introjected motivation	Any reference to doing job placements because of an internal pressure to do so.
	3.4. External motivation	Any reference to doing job placements because of external pressure.
	3.5. Amotivation	Any reference to not wanting to do job placements.
	3.6. Needs-supportive and meaningful	Any reference to job placements that are supporting wellbeing and are experienced as meaningful for achieving future goals.
	3.7. Needs-supportive, not meaningful	Any reference to job placements that are supporting wellbeing, but are not experienced as meaningful for achieving future goals.
	3.8. Needs-thwarting, meaningful	Any reference to job placements that are experienced as undermining wellbeing, but as meaningful for achieving future goals.
4. Psychosocial support	3.9. Needs-thwarting, not meaningful	Any reference to job placements that are experienced as undermining wellbeing and not meaningful for achieving future goals.
	4.1. Experiences of psychosocial support	Any reference to experiences of psychosocial support courses.

Summary

This dissertation examines the research question: *How do active labour market policies affect unemployed people's wellbeing?*

The study's main contribution to the literature on active labour market policies (ALMPs) is the development of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how ALMPs affect the wellbeing of benefit recipients. The framework offers several novel advantages:

- a. It provides a platform for bringing together various strains of literature on the experiences of benefit recipients to draw conclusions about the implications of active labour market policies for wellbeing.
- b. As a broad framework, it can help us make sense of how different concepts such as agency, self-efficacy, and stigma are related, based on a unifying set of basic assumptions about human behaviour.
- c. It enables identification of the aspects of active labour market policies that either support or thwart basic psychological needs – and by extension wellbeing – thereby providing a more complete picture than the purely critical approaches found in for example the welfare conditionality literature.

In addition to this theoretical contribution, the study provides an empirical contribution to our understanding of how young unemployed people with mental health issues experience active labour market policies. This is a population group that is receiving much political attention, yet there is limited literature specifically on ALMPs for vulnerable young people.

The study draws on a qualitative case study using a qualitative longitudinal research design, which involved repeated in-depth interviews over a period of one year with a group of 27 recipients of unemployment benefits in a Danish municipality. A total of 75 interviews were carried out, with between 1-5 interviews per individual.

The proposed theoretical framework distinguishes between three aspects of ALMPs: policy level, implementation processes and interventions. The framework draws on Self-Determination Theory, the existing literature on ALMPs as well as the case study of young unemployed people in Denmark to formulate propositions about how different aspects of ALMPs may affect basic psychological needs and wellbeing.

A main conclusion concerns the importance of social norms and expectations for understanding people's experiences of ALMPs. Rather than the standard rational choice understanding of behaviour that is commonly employed in studies of the effects of ALMPs, I found that people are guided

mainly be social norms and expectations. These include in particular norms of reciprocity and deservingness, which compels people to show that they are contributing to society in return for their benefits. Since one way to contribute is to participate in activation, the risk is that vulnerable people accept participation in activities that are detrimental to their wellbeing.

In terms of policy design, the use of behavioural conditionalities has been criticised in particular by the welfare conditionality literature. My addition to this literature is, first, to note how people's experiences of the overall ALMP 'system' – i.e. the complex rules and regulations governing their behaviour – is decoupled from their experiences of specific encounters with caseworkers and participation in activities. Participants in my case study generally described these specific experiences as positive, yet throughout their period on benefits, most maintained a negative view of 'the system'.

In order to unpack this negative experience, I identified five key aspects of the young people's experience of life on benefits: a) restricted agency, b) feeling monitored, c) fear of making mistakes, d) financial insecurity and e) uncertainty about the future. Together, they create the experience of a 'conditionality mindset', which has negative implications for the wellbeing of benefit recipients. In particular it restricts people's sense of agency. This analysis is presented in detail in Chapter 6.

Turning to the implementation process, I find that user involvement and trusting relations between caseworkers and citizens are important for the young people's wellbeing. To which extent this is achieved depends on the ability of caseworkers to behave in ways that support autonomy, competence and relatedness, for example by practicing active listening.

Contrary to the welfare conditionality literature, based mainly on UK experiences, I find that it is in fact possible for caseworkers to support citizen wellbeing in the Danish case. This is because the Danish system, despite formally being based on conditionalities and governed by new public management principles and detailed process regulations, still leaves sufficient flexibility to allow a high degree of caseworker discretion in the implementation.

This discretion is what enables caseworkers to develop a personal relationship with citizens, and tailor interventions to their individual needs. There is, however, a dilemma here, since the more personal approach, although valued by both caseworkers and citizens, sometimes makes it difficult for citizens to know exactly which demands they have to comply with.

Rather than being met by 'hard' demands, they are usually met by 'soft' expectations, as interactions between citizens and caseworkers are based more on norms of reciprocity and deservingness than on rules and regulations. This sometimes makes it difficult for the young people in the case study to ascertain when they have 'done enough' to comply with expectations.

When it comes to interventions, I examined the young people's experiences of job placements and psychosocial support courses. The longitudinal data highlights the importance of timing interventions with people's needs at specific times. Job placements can be useful if they are aligned with people's own wishes and happen at a time when people are ready for it. However, they have to both support basic psychological needs and be meaningful in relation to people's goals. A main finding of the case study is that psychosocial support plays a key role in supporting young people with mental health issues recover and make progress towards education and health. The role of psychosocial support in active labour market policies is an area that merits more research.

Dansk resumé

Studier af effekterne af den aktive beskæftigelsespolitik har indtil videre primært beskæftiget sig med effekterne på beskæftigelse. Det er i og for sig naturligt nok, givet politikkenes målsætning om at få de ledige i job. Der er imidlertid gode grunde til at se mere bredt på effekterne af beskæftigelsespolitikken, og ikke mindst på eventuelle utilsigtede negative konsekvenser.

Der er flere forskellige årsager til, at det er særligt aktuelt at se på beskæftigelsespolitikkenes påvirkning af de lediges trivsel i øjeblikket:

For det første er der en kontinuerlig offentlig debat, som de seneste år har været meget kritisk i forhold til Jobcentrenes arbejde. Sager om borgere, der har fået det værre af at være i 'systemet' står i kø i pressen. Samtidig forsøger forskere og praktikere at nuancere billedet, ved at påpege, at der trods alt også er mange ting der fungerer, og mange borgere der er tilfredse med den hjælp de får i Jobcentret.

Derudover er et fokus på trivsel i bred forstand vigtig i den nuværende situation med lav arbejdsløshed, fordi langt størstedelen af de ledige i denne situation har problemer ud over ledighed. For de yngre arbejdsløse er det især psykiske problemer som depression og angst, eller diagnoser som autisme og ADHD.

Samtidig har man med de seneste reformer af beskæftigelsespolitikken udbredt brugen af krav og sanktioner til også at omfatte de mest sårbare arbejdsløse, men uden at det er klart, hvilke konsekvenser det har haft for deres trivsel.

Den akademiske litteratur er ikke til megen hjælp i forhold til at rede trådene ud. Som det fremgår af litteraturgennemgangen i afhandlingens kapitel 2, så stikker den eksisterende litteratur i mange forskellige retninger – og som sagt stadig med et primært fokus på jobeffekter.

I denne afhandling forsøger jeg derfor at blive klogere på denne problemstilling, ved at undersøge det overordnede forskningsspørgsmål: *'Hvordan påvirker den aktive beskæftigelsespolitik arbejdsløse borgeres trivsel.'*

Som det fremgår er spørgsmålet formuleret meget bredt og generelt. Det skyldes at afhandlingens primære bidrag er at formulere en teoretisk ramme, der kan bruges til at evaluere beskæftigelsespolitikkenes konsekvenser for de lediges trivsel generelt, på tværs af lande, ydelser og grupper af ledige.

En sådan teoretisk ramme vil kunne bidrage til at skabe større sammenhæng i den litteratur, der beskæftiger sig med de lediges oplevelse af forskellige aspekter af den aktive beskæftigelsespolitik.

Derudover bidrager afhandlingen også mere konkret til forståelsen af, hvordan psykisk sårbare unge arbejdsløse oplever den danske beskæftigelsesindsats, gennem et kvalitativt forløbsstudie med 27 unge i en dansk kommune. Over en periode på omkring et år gennemførte jeg gentagne interviews med de unge – i alt 75 interviews.

Jeg har på denne måde fået mulighed for at tale med de unge i dybden om deres oplevelse af beskæftigelsesindsatsen. De gentagne interviews har givet mig mulighed for at høre om deres oplevelse af for eksempel møder, virksomhedspraktikker og kurser relativt kort tid efter de er sket. Samtidig giver forløbsstudiet mulighed for at forstå de unges udvikling over tid – og hvordan beskæftigelsesindsatsen spiller sammen med andre begivenheder i deres liv i forhold til at påvirke forskellige aspekter af deres trivsel.

Den teoretiske ramme skelner mellem tre forskellige aspekter af den aktive beskæftigelsespolitik: den politiske ramme, implementerings-processen og de konkrete interventioner.

I forhold til den overordnede politiske ramme har jeg undersøgt de unges oplevelser af det der ofte kaldes 'systemet', dvs. de overordnede love og regler de unge berøres af. En første konklusion her er, at de unges oplevelse af 'systemet' er overraskende løsrevet fra deres oplevelse af de konkrete møder med sagsbehandlere eller de aktiviteter de deltager i. Mens de unge har overvejende positive oplevelser af sagsbehandlerne og aktiviteterne er deres evaluering af 'systemet' vedblivende negativt.

For at forklare dette har jeg analyseret de unges udsagn om deres oplevelse af systemet, og identificeret fem forskellige aspekter af denne oplevelse: begrænset handlerum, følelsen af at blive overvåget, frygt for at lave fejl, økonomisk usikkerhed, og usikkerhed om fremtiden. Kapitel seks folder denne analyse ud i detaljer og beskriver hvilke karakteristika ved den danske aktive beskæftigelsespolitik, der skaber disse oplevelser, samt hvilke konsekvenser det har for de unges trivsel.

I forhold til implementeringsprocessen, så handler dette aspekt primært om mødet mellem de unge og frontmedarbejderne. Som sagt har de unge overvejende positive oplevelser, om end de fleste kan berette om både gode og dårlige oplevelser. Kapitel syv beskriver, hvad der karakteriserer henholdsvis de gode og dårlige oplevelser. En generel konklusion er at forholdet mellem de unge og frontmedarbejderne er enormt vigtigt for de unges trivsel, både direkte, og indirekte gennem den betydning relationen har for, at de unge får den rigtige indsats.

Selvom den danske beskæftigelsesindsats formelt set er præget af detaljeret procesregulering, så finder jeg at det, ud fra de unges perspektiv, trods alt er muligt for sagsbehandlerne at møde de unge på en måde der er fleksibel og tilpasset deres behov. Sagsbehandlernes tilgang til mødet, især deres evne til

at lytte til og forstå de unges behov, er således væsentligt for hvordan beskæftigelsesindsatsen påvirker de unges trivsel.

En overraskende konklusion fra studiet er, at mødet mellem de unge og sagsbehandlerne kun i mindre grad er styret af specifikke krav og regler, og i højere grad af sociale normer og forventninger. De unges tanker, følelse og adfærd er således i høj grad styret af stærke normer omkring det at bidrage til samfundet og gøre sig fortjent til at modtage offentlig støtte. Det er positivt i den forstand, at de unge ikke bliver mødt med hårde, ufleksible, krav om at deltage i aktiviteter som ikke giver mening for dem. Men det kan også være negativt på den måde at de unge er meget usikre på, hvilke forventninger de skal leve op til, og hvornår de gør det godt nok.

I forhold til de konkrete interventioner de unge tilbydes har jeg specifikt analyseret deres oplevelse af virksomhedspraktikker og kurser der tilbyder psykosocial støtte. Jeg finder her, at virksomhedspraktikker ofte opleves af de unge som et nyttigt værktøj, men at det er vigtigt at de først tilbydes når de unge er klar til det, og at der sikres et match mellem de krav arbejdspladsen stiller og de unges situation. Også her er frontmedarbejdernes evne til at lytte til de unges behov vigtigt.

Kurser, der tilbyder psykosocial støtte opleves af de unge med psykiske problemer som det absolut mest virksomme element i beskæftigelsesindsatsen, og som noget der har potentiale til at forandre deres liv til det bedre. Brugen af psykosocial støtte i beskæftigelsesindsatsen er derfor et område der kalder på både mere forskning og mere politisk bevågenhed.