

Planning for a Job

The Trying Experience of Unemployment during the COVID-19 Crisis in Denmark

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Title: Planning for a Job: The Trying Experience of Unemployment During the Covid-19 Crisis in Denmark

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Abstract

Like most OECD countries, unemployed people in Denmark have been subject to activation policies imbued with “rights and obligations” for decades. However, during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, activation and conditionality were temporarily suspended. This article explores what happens to the experience of unemployment when part of the system is put on hold. Based on in-depth interviews conducted during the Covid-19 crisis with 25 unemployed people, we apply the theoretical framework of regimes of engagement developed by Laurent Thévenot to explore how unemployed people cope with and reflect on their situation. In doing so, we explore how the plans of the unemployed to find a job interact with or create tension between other engagements related to everyday life (family life, ideas about quality of life, etc.) as well as living up to the demands of public employment services (PES). In this way, the suspension provides an opportunity to examine the effects of the active labor market programs through their absence.

Keywords

Covid-19, regimes of engagement, unemployment, Denmark, active labor market policies

Introduction

Even though unemployment, as a relatively stable statistical category, has existed in most Western countries since it was invented at the beginning of the 20th century (Salais et al., 1986; Walters, 2000; Zimmermann, 2001), the experience of unemployment (Boland & Griffin, 2015) is a heterogeneous and ambiguous experience affected by a complex mix of individual, social, economic, and political variables that vary over time and space (Demazière & Delpierre, 2020). In this article, we explore the experience(s) of unemployment in Denmark during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period marked by increased socioeconomic insecurity and a temporary, but complete, suspension of activation and conditionality in the employment system. The case, thus, allow us to gain a rich understanding of the relation between the experience of unemployment and the workings of activation policies in their absence during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most OECD countries have reformed their PES gradually but radically during the last three decades in much the same direction that can be described as the “active turn” (Bonoli, 2013; Hansen, 2019; Turrini et al., 2015; van Berkel et al., 2012). While the reforms entail a highly diverse set of instruments and adjustments, their common denominator is the attempt to reorient labor market policies towards the sole goal of making the unemployed “active”, i.e. getting them to work, ultimately by reinserting them into the labor market. The active turn thus also entails that policies and instruments are increasingly concerned with how to govern the behavior of the unemployed through economic incentives, individual action plans, job search obligations, interviews, activation courses, etc., and if needed, through coercive measures of control and sanctioning (Hansen, 2019; Lindsay & Daguerre, 2009; Pultz, 2017). Several studies have pointed to how this institutional change has affected the experience of unemployment across the OECD (Demazière & Delpierre, 2020), from the Anglo-Saxon countries (Boland & Griffin, 2016; Dwyer, 2010; McDonald & Marston, 2005; Sharone, 2013; Whelan, 2021) to the continental countries (Demazière, 2017) and the Nordic countries (Garsten et al., 2016; Pultz, 2017). Cross-national comparative studies highlight the variation of the mix between labor markets, activation policies and how they affect the experience of unemployment (Chen, 2015; Sharone, 2013; Pultz & Sharone, 2020); however, across variations, unemployment has been individualized, making the individual responsible for the situation and hence also prone to blaming themselves (Pultz, 2017; Sharone, 2013).

These effects of the active turn on the experience of unemployment are largely unsurprising since the active turn is legitimized and permeated by a “moral economy” that re-evaluates the

phenomenon of unemployment according to new normative standards that put the worth (behavior) of the unemployed to the test (Carstensen & Hansen, 2019; Hansen, 2019; Nielsen, 2021). Studies inspired by Foucault's work on governmentality (Foucault, 2007) have thus shown how the active turn has led to the (re)invention of a plethora of instruments designed to conduct the behavior of the unemployed and create a certain kind of subject (Dean, 1995; Lessenich, 2011; Pultz, 2017; Walters, 1997) such as the "job seeker" (Boland & Griffin, 2015), the "at risk client" (Caswell et al., 2010; Pultz, 2016), the responsible self (McDonald & Marston 2005) and the indebted self (Lazzarato, 2012). This installs new dynamics in the encounters between the PES, often embodied in the job counselor or social worker at the employment office, and the unemployed (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; McDonald & Marston, 2005). From this perspective these encounters involve "subjectification" (Pultz, 2016) and "roleplaying" (Boland, 2015), using the vocabulary of Foucault and Goffman, that have an effect within as well as outside of the walls of the employment office. They may lead to self-blame (Pultz, 2017; Sharone, 2013), stigma (Patrick, 2016; Whelan, 2021), shame (Pultz, 2018), loss of social citizenship (Dwyer, 2010), restricted agency and work first values (Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021) and democratic participation (Watson, 2015) as well as to occasional resistance (Baker & Davis, 2018; Nielsen, 2015).

The studies mentioned above, are in opposition to a large body of studies on unemployment building on the deprivation theory inspired by Jahoda et al.'s (1982) influential studies of the Austrian city of Mairienthal in the 1930s (Fryer, 2019). Here, unemployment is problematized as a lack or loss of work, and according to Boland and Griffin (2020), this is problematic because it tends to reduce, simplify, and overlook important aspects of how the unemployment experience is shaped in society: "Effectively, it theorises un-employment negatively, as a lack or absence of work, and therefore fails to explore or interpret what this experience is in itself. Furthermore, it neglects the ways in which the experience of unemployment is shaped by governmental institutions" (p. 31). In addition, it is problematic because it falls within, rather than questions, the morality that underpins the active turn (Fryer, 2019).

The deprivation theory is also evident in the "psy-sciences" establishing a link between unemployment and poorer mental health, either as a result of unemployment or as one of the explanatory factors leading to unemployment, or both:

The above, dominant, approaches position both "unemployment" and "mental health" as "real" and independent and then claim a causal relationship between them which is

truthed by means of “psy science”, thus legitimating psy as a science capable of demonstrating real causal relationships between real “things.” (Fryer, 2019, p. 290)

In alignment with Fryer’s (2019) critique, we do not aim to identify hidden causal relationships between reified categories, nor do we wish to explore unemployment as a pathology (Boland & Griffin, 2015). We aim to explore the experience of unemployment as it is lived, felt, and thought in all its complexity and ambiguity, by the unemployed themselves. To do this, we apply insights from French pragmatic sociology (Blokker, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), specifically the conceptual framework of “regimes of engagement” developed by French sociologist Laurent Thévenot (2001a, 2006, 2011a). Here, we take into account and zoom in on actors’ own preoccupation with securing a living, in a narrow as well as a broad sense, in the short and the longer term. Governmental techniques and institutions are an important but not the only part of the “environment” that unemployed actors respond to and engage with. With or without system obligations, the unemployed are still confronted with the pragmatic need of everyday life to secure goods (economic and non-economic) in their precarious situation. Hence, we approach the unemployed as actively *engaging* in a composite and versatile environment.

As mentioned above, we study the engagement of unemployed persons in the distinct context of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Denmark, a period with sense of deep crisis, both in terms of public health and economically. Although economic crises may function as “exogenous shocks” provoking radical policy change (Skocpol & Pierson, 2002), this was not the case in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 that rather led to a consolidation of the active turn (Hansen & Leschke, 2017; Smith et al., 2018). But perhaps the Covid-19 crisis is going to be different. From a macroeconomic perspective commentators have, as they did for the financial crisis, foreseen the return of Keynesian demand-side policies replacing neoliberal austerity. In Denmark, there are indicators of this shift in policy goals in the financing of Covid-19 expenses through loan-taking and through massive investments in job maintenance resulting in rather modest increases in unemployment. Like in many other countries, the government’s intervention in the economy has been justified by a strong discourse of solidarity and collective responsibility for mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

In parallel with economic compensation for businesses, the government thus decided to suspend activation from March 12, 2020, including the obligations related to job searching and interviews as well as the countdown of the entitlement period for unemployment insurance. The suspension was

justified by the minister of employment as “only fair” since the lockdown was “obviously making it harder to find a job” (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2020). However, activation was only suspended temporarily. Since the end of May, when the lockdown was repealed, the picture has become more blurred. Some obligations have returned (e.g. having to search for a job) while others continue to be suspended (e.g. physical interviews at the employment office). Nonetheless, the suspension showed the possibility of thinking differently about unemployment and thus, perhaps, also the possibility of a different experience of unemployment, with less self-blaming and stigma and perhaps with another approach to the quest of finding a job. In this paper, we explore this question through 25 interviews with unemployed people in Denmark undertaken from May to September 2020. The interviews thus took place with a varying degree of suspension of the activation policies.

The new discourse and the temporary exemption of obligations provided some room and perspective to reflect on the situation and role of PES, but it also put the unemployed in a highly ambiguous situation with increased freedom but a future ever more uncertain. We thus study how the activating PES affect and shape the unemployment experience through the prism of its temporary suspension. However, our interest lies not only in the effect of activation policies. Rather, our interest lies in the hardship of the unemployed as they try to cope with an uncertain situation in which their future career, economic situation and well-being are put to the test, and in which PES are one among many elements in the “environment” of the unemployed. In short, we focus on the experience of unemployment (Boland & Griffin, 2015). In doing so, we are contributing to the series of studies that explore the experience of unemployment from the vantage point of the unemployed person and their everyday life. Being unemployed is an important aspect of everyday life; however, in accordance with Fryer (2019), we aim to explore this heterogeneous experience in all its complexity, rather than reducing and simplifying relations between “unemployment” and “psychological consequences”.

The paper is structured as follows. We present the theoretical framework and move on to describe the methods we have applied. The analysis is structured by first exploring the plan of the system and from there we investigate how unemployed people relate to and reflect on it. We also explore more broadly how the participants engage in other regimes as well as we analyze dynamics between engagements. We discuss implications of the findings, and we critically reflect on the consequences of the planning regime as dominating within the system but also at an individual level, leaving some room but not much for alternative ways of conducting oneself in the face of unemployment.

Framework of analysis

French pragmatic sociology has been applied in mapping the plurality of normative “orders of worth” or “repertoires of evaluation” that have been used to justify the active turn in public debates (Carstensen & Hansen, 2019; Hansen, 2019; Nielsen, 2018, 2021). However, by adopting the framework of regimes of engagement, we delve below the public debate and address the question of morality from the perspective of the experience and actions of the unemployed. The term “engagement” the pragmatic articulations of linking reality and goods (Thévenot, 2001b). Contrary to the sociological concepts of “norms” and “meaning”, engagement ascribes a more dynamic and less deterministic perspective on people’s actions (Thévenot, 2002). The starting point of the sociology of regimes of engagement is how a person coordinates their actions between themselves and their environment, including other people (Thévenot, 2011a). Engagement is an attempt to answer what is at stake in this coordination and points to the importance of morality, here, conceptualized as goods. Engagement, thus, refers to the way a person is dependent on their environment in the quest to secure goods as well as how the quest relies on the qualification of the environment in accordance with a good (Thévenot, 2007, p. 415). The distinct usage of the concept of “goods” lends from both economics pointing to the issue of valuation (e.g. private and public goods) and political theory pointing to shared principles of justice (e.g. common good) while moving beyond such conceptions. “Goods”, in this sociology, is the pivot of engagements that enable actors to assess whether an engagement is assured or put to the test. However, unlike the economic conception, reducing goods to a matter of utility, or political theory, seeking *the* normative principle of justice, the sociology of regimes of engagements is attentive to a plurality of goods. Thévenot identifies four different *regimes* of engagement that each rely on a distinct good to qualify the environment and thereby assess what is relevant.

In the first regime, the regime of *orders of worth*, the reality is qualified to assess the *worth* of things as well as people and their actions according to different conceptions of the *common* good. Engagement in this regime thus involves justification and critique in which reality is evaluated by moral yardsticks. The concept of regime builds on the joint work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), who studied the way people resolve everyday conflicts and disputes, e.g. at the workplace, through this regime of engagement. In relation to the question of unemployment and activation, Hansen has mapped seven “cities of unemployment” that are mobilized in public debates to justify and criticize

reforms (Hansen, 2019). These orders of worth contain different understandings of unemployment and ways to govern it and they contain different conceptions of the worthiness of the unemployed.

Contrary to the regime of orders of worth, the other three regimes are not prepared for public disputes and conflict, since they do not rely on common goods and are often non-verbal, relying on bodily gestures (Thévenot, 2006). In the second regime of *plans*, engagement is directed towards a good that plays a key role in our coordination between ourselves and others—that of accomplishing plans. This engagement relies on the capacity to project oneself into the future and qualify the environment instrumentally according to the plan (Thévenot, 2011b). The third regime of *familiarity* refers to engagement in the environment by continued use, customs and routines to assure the good of the comfortable feeling of ease where one familiarizes oneself with one's surroundings. Finally, the regime of *exploration* designates the kind of engagement through which people strive for the good of excitement through curiosity, discoveries and innovations (Auray, 2010; Thévenot, 2011b).

It is one of the key points that engagement is not smooth but trying, tension-filled and fragile. Engagement, in other words, can fail. Thévenot describes this as the two sides of engagement, “eyes open” and “eyes closed” (Thévenot, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). First, “eyes closed”, is the side of quietude and implies confidence and trust in the engagement, whereas “opening one's eyes” implies doubt and suspicion as to what the engagement is neglecting and/or sacrificing. “Opening one's eyes” is turning the engagement from relying on “what is” to “what could be” (Blokker & Brighenti, 2011; Hansen, 2016, p. 132).

Each of the four regimes has its distinct format for changing between the two sides of engagement (Thévenot, 2011a). In the regime of orders of worth, “eyes closed” has a ceremonial character in which actors accept the valuation or worth of persons and things as well as the common good they attach to it. Engagement with “eyes open” in this regime turns the situation into one in which the valuation is put to the test and critique and justification are necessary to make coordination and agreement possible. In the regime of plans, “eyes closed” is following the plan with determination whereas “opening one's eyes” is visible in indecisiveness and doubt with regard to achieving objectives of the plan. In the regime of familiarity, “eyes closed” is routine-like and entails trust and confidence in the environment, whereas “eyes open” is characterized by groping and unease. Finally, the regimes of exploration may change from curiosity and exploring (“eyes closed”) to uncommitted and detached (“eyes open”).

Lastly, it is worth noting what role power and government play in the sociology of engagement. Clearly, institutions and governmental instruments, such as the ones the unemployed encounter in the local PES, are part of the “environment” that people engage with. From the perspective of this sociology, governmental instruments can be problematized, on the one hand, for formatting certain forms of engagement while oppressing others and, on the other hand, for instigating an engagement with “eyes closed,” leading to depoliticization (Hansen, 2016). Our focus is on actors’ engagement and capacities to ensure certain goods in which the governmental techniques of the local PES play an important role but not the only one. This is not to downplay the power of such techniques but to point to the composite and tension-filled reality when the unemployed are put to the test, within and beyond the system. Hence, the sociology of engagement seeks to render visible the variety of doubtful and sometimes critical practices and action. For the purpose of study, the theoretical framework is fruitful, as engagements in different regimes allow for a broader analytical scope which is necessary when activation policies are suspended for a while.

Methods

We conducted 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with unemployed people in Denmark (see Table 1) from May to September. We interviewed people who were unemployed before Covid-19 set in (N=20), as well as people who became unemployed due to Covid-19 (N=5). In addition, we conducted interviews at a point in time in which all activation policies were put on hold as well as during a hybrid period during which some policies were still suspended and others back in force.

The empirical data were gathered based on an overall social psychological and sociological interest in the experience of unemployment. We therefore aimed to produce data not solely on issues related to the PES; we also included questions addressing the everyday life of unemployed people, seen from the individual’s point of view (see also Pultz, 2017).

The interview protocol aimed to elicit information about unemployed people’s trajectories, exploring the various degrees of suspended activation policies. The empirical material was created in an interactive fashion (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Given our interest in the experience of unemployment, including the everyday life and practices of the unemployed, we also asked broader questions relating to private circumstances such as personal relationships, hobbies, prior

professional trajectory, etc. The empirical material allowed for exploring the complexity necessary for analyzing the experience of unemployment.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted online using software such as Skype and Zoom (N=15) or telephone interviews (N=10). All interviews were recorded and have been transcribed ad verbatim. Quotations extracted from the interviews have been translated by the authors.

Based on analytical workshops, we developed a coding manual, and subsequently coded all interviews in NVivo. After carefully reading the manuscript, we discussed relevant codes arising from the empirical material (Covid-19) as well as from prior studies (self-blame). We applied a range of coding categories ranging from the very broad and inclusive (Covid-19) to more specific categories (job interviews). Initially, three researchers coded the same interview and we discussed areas in which we agreed and disagreed. We revised the coding manual a couple of times, adding new codes and eliminating coding categories that were left unused.

For the purpose of this article, we focused on coding categories relating to “self-perception and self-governing”, “meaningful activities”, “meeting the system” and “Covid-19”. In addition to analyzing the material related to these codes, we read transcripts to explore whether we had missed any information the data might have contained about how the temporary suspension of activation policies affected the experience of unemployment. During the analytical conversations we became increasingly aware of the tension between the official rules and demands and how these were administered at employment offices and unemployment funds (how people are governed) and the various ways people conduct themselves (how people govern themselves). Experiences during the suspension provided us with an unprecedented perspective on the workings of existing practices, as well as a new way of exploring the tensions. That has allowed us to critically reflect on them in their absence as well as on the inbuilt ideologies they reflect and on the implications for the experience of unemployment more broadly.

To examine how people engage, we must analyze their narratives describing what they do and why they do it (Luhtakallio & Tavory, 2018). How do they describe engaging in the job search and with what reasons and doubts? Who do they spend their time with and what do they identify as important, both now while unemployed, and in the future? What do they see themselves becoming through their various engagements? In analyzing the interview material, our goal is to improve our

understanding of the various forms of engagement as well as to identify patterns; what types of engagement in the various regimes are encouraged in the system?

Our interest in the situational experience of unemployment and the format of in-depth interviews pose challenges. First, an interview research design may accentuate engagements in the regime of orders of worth that, unlike the other engagements, is prepared for formal and public discussion with strangers. Second, the framework's situational method is somehow in tension with the stylized situation of the interview. Here, ethnographic methods might have provided better access to exploring engagements that are more idiosyncratic, less verbal and thus not well prepared for dialogue with a stranger (Hansen et al., 2016), but this was not an option due to the circumstances of the pandemic. Instead we tried to overcome the challenges—first, by building trust through an informal tone and simply by taking the time to listen and, second, by probing questions focused on letting the unemployed describe and exemplify by means of concrete practices, situations, and events, as a gateway to more personal, informal and idiosyncratic engagement. Linking situations and various expressions further enabled us to substantiate our claims relating to changes from before and during the pandemic and suspension.

The nature of the study did not require ethical approval in Denmark. All institutions and interviewees were anonymized for the sake of confidentiality and all interviewees gave verbal consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. However, this does not simply resolve all ethical challenges. Our perhaps most important concern relates to the political context in which this study was inevitably embedded. In this context, imbued with suspicion regarding the behavior and deservingness of the unemployed, the often intimate details and reflections provided by the unemployed presented in the following risk fueling calls for (ever) more control and sanctioning mechanisms.

Analysis

Relying primarily on existing policy documents, we begin the analysis by briefly outlining the orders of worth and plans embedded in the Danish employment system. Here, a composite engagement of orders of worth and the plan regime plays a key role. Following this, we turn to our interview data and explore unemployed people's own engagements. When the system's plan is temporarily suspended during the Covid-19 crisis, to what extent do the unemployed still navigate

according to the plan of the system? Do they come up with entirely different plans? Does the suspension of the rules and demands leave more room for other regimes such as the familiarity or the explorative domains? Do unemployed people “open” their eyes and see the system differently? Shedding light on the tension between the way people are governed and how they govern themselves (also referred to as the system’s plan and the individual’s plan) allows us to critically reflect on the activation policies aimed at creating the active jobseeker, as well as allowing us to assess the implications of these policies on the experience of unemployment.

Orders of worth and plans of the system

Inherent in the activation reforms is an understanding that unemployed people are only eligible for unemployment benefit or social assistance if they comply with certain activities (Pultz, 2017). The aim of these policies is twofold: 1) active behavior of the unemployed leads to a job and 2) receiving money from the state implies testing the unemployed person who must prove themselves worthy of receiving benefits. Both aims, that in practice are deeply entangled, are saturated with moral questions of *worth* (Hansen, 2019). In the first aim, it is a matter of bringing the unemployed to a state of worthiness (paying taxes, self-supporting, self-realizing), while in the second aim, it is a matter of evaluating the current state of worthiness of the unemployed (willingness to work, flexibility, outreaching, investing). In this way the instruments and activities of PES have the double purpose of *changing* the behavior of the unemployed and testing *whether* the unemployed in fact change their behavior. These policies are not only aimed at changing behavior but also target the feelings and emotions of unemployed people in an affective economy (Pultz, 2017). This “moral economy of activation” relies on multiple orders of worth conceptualizing the unemployed in different ways – as people responding to economic incentives, as potentially lazy and incompetent and thus in need of discipline and control, as lacking skills and thus in need of investment in human capital (Hansen, 2019).

On the one hand, PES govern according to these orders of worth through standardized formal tests (Hansen, 2019) that cannot be questioned, such as the job search requirement and mandatory interviews. Concretely, the rules of activity imply active job searching, such as applying for two jobs per week as well as documenting these job search efforts. It entails participating in mandatory courses and conversations with job consultants (Pultz, 2017). According to the rules of availability,

unemployed people have to be available in relation to the labor market, meaning that they can only be engaged in either volunteer work to a certain extent and they are not officially allowed to take on caring activities. They have to be able to take on a full-time job the following day, including three hours of commuting, in order to be eligible for receiving money. Failing to live up to either of these demands can lead to economic sanctions (Pultz, 2017).

On the other hand, the activities in PES are justified as “personalized”, based on the idea that unemployed persons are a diverse group with multiple factors, and thus orders of worth, that explain their situation. This has resulted in the proliferation of profiling tools to categorize the unemployed (Desiere et al., 2019). For instance, if a person’s likelihood of becoming long-term unemployed is estimated to be high, they have to engage in PES activities more frequently (Pultz, 2016). However, a key instrument to ensure at least a formal personalization is the individual *plan* which is agreed by both counselor and the unemployed person at the initial meeting and subsequently evaluated and revised (Hansen, 2019). In the digitalized Danish system, the unemployed person can visit “My Plan” which provides them with “an overview of everything that needs to happen, forward-looking, in the employment effort”. Thus, activation and creation of the active job seeker is enacted in and through the planning regime ensuring that the “citizen no longer experiences the plan as the administrative paper of the system but as a real plan he or she contributes to and has ownership of.”¹

Existing rules and demands aimed at unemployed people’s behavior and the concrete ways of administering these rules and laws to some degree reflect how the system encourages unemployed people to conduct themselves (Pultz, 2017). Overall, the employment system can best be characterized as an excessive engagement in the regime of plans, as everything is formatted according to the quest for a job. The Covid-19 crisis is easing the authoritative and formal element of the systems’ plan but it is also de-emphasizing the personalized effort (fewer or no interviews, no activation, etc.). In what follows, we explore what the suspension of activation instruments and obligations means for the engagement of the unemployed.

Engaging in the regime of plans

¹ Description of “My Plan” from The Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment (STAR) webpage: <https://star.dk/it/borger-it/min-plan-digitalt-overblik-over-beskaeftigelsesindsatsen/>. Retrieved June 6, 2021.

From the orders of worth and plans of the system, we now explore unemployed people's ways of engaging. As we argued earlier, PES and their activation instruments are aimed at constructing the active jobseeker who should use all possible means to find a job. It seems difficult for the unemployed to have their "eyes closed" in the plan engagement, as unemployment for most people testifies to the plan to some extent having failed, and repeatedly so. Overall, unemployed people continuously reflect on their job search plans and the strategies they employ in the quest for a job. In alignment with this tendency, most of the interviewees describe continuous reflection and doubt in terms of the specific configuration of the plan: Am I spending my time in the best possible fashion? Should I put different strategies into use? Can I do more? The Covid-19 crisis adds an extra layer of doubt and insecurity, resulting in "eyes wide open" in which the plan engagement is put to the test vis-à-vis other forms of engagement. Below, Maria expresses the personal agony involved in having her eyes wide open and critically reflecting on how to govern oneself. Asked directly about her idea of what she wants to do from now on and what she thinks it will take for her to get a job, she answers, obviously frustrated:

That's what's on my mind. That's the question I wake up with every morning. Am I doing well enough right now? And that's really... I think that's one of the big things that has changed now that the pressure is there too, that there's a dead end, which is, am I following the right strategy? So I'm spending so much time thinking about my strategy. That is, what is the right strategy? How should I spend my energy? Should I call all my network first? And there's no right answers, you just try to hope. (Maria, 31)

Engaging wholeheartedly in the planning regime without having control in terms of the outcomes makes the unemployment experience exhausting. The failed plan makes her feel unhappy here and now, but she also worries about the long-term effects of her unemployment.

Well, yes, you're unhappy getting up every day not knowing what to do. But the long-term consequences of how it affects my adult life, and thereby, when can we buy [a house]. We've had meetings with the bank. "When are you getting a job?" Well, I really don't know. I wish I was able to give you an answer. And all that about applying for jobs at supermarkets, well, here during the corona crisis, I've also applied for jobs far away and I've also applied for jobs at schools. But I don't hear anything, I'm getting rejected. Well, okay, I am not useful there, either. (Maria, 31)

The insecurity about the future again puts pressure on her short-term plan, and at the same time it puts the long-term plan on hold, making her ever more flexible in terms of applying for jobs across a wider geographical range and across professions as well targeting lower-ranged jobs. In addition, being rejected in relation to jobs she did not even want in the first place leaves her feeling even more useless.

But how has the Covid-19 crisis and the temporary suspension of obligations affected the engagement in the plan to get a job? In the empirical material, we find that even for those who are already very actively seeking a job and are quick to write job applications, the suspension of the requirement to apply for two jobs per week does make a difference—not to the pace of searching but to the valuation of job searching. As Else says: “It’s been great [laughing] [to get rid of the demands, ed.]; it’s not like I have applied for fewer jobs”. Maiken finds that job searching has been more meaningful during the period when the claim has been suspended, both because she does not have to apply for jobs, as she puts it, and because she can apply for jobs in a more flexible manner, writing up more applications at times when there are interesting vacancies and doing less at times when there are fewer:

Well, it’s very different, the fact that this feeling of pressure of “I also have to remember to apply for that.” It’s easier to get it done now, when it’s less “you have to do it.” Because there isn’t the same stress, that “now you have to remember to apply for two jobs,” because if I only apply for one job, then I can apply for three jobs the next week, and it’s up to me. (Maiken, 29)

Laura is relieved that there is a break from the communications from the employment office and the unemployment fund:

I actually think it’s been a bit liberating that I haven’t had to respond to this and that all the time, the regular flood of mails from the employment office, “now you have to check this,” and the unemployment fund, “now you have to keep an eye on that”, “fill out this” and this and that. There’s been much more breathing space. (Laura, 26)

From Laura's description it seems that requests and demands from PES are overwhelming and she also needed a break from them.

Maiken states that instead of planning her job search on the basis of activity requirements, she now has the opportunity to focus on the labor market, and only spend time on applications that make sense to her. The suspension of the requirements makes it more visible to her that the system's plan was associated with "pressure" and "stress". To Maria this is related to the way the suspension has removed the formal element of the job search:

Generally, I have enjoyed the feeling that there's no superior who's checking whether I fulfill my obligations before May 25th, so you know, not having the superior "Sauron's Eye" on me... I haven't applied for jobs to prove that I apply for jobs. I've applied for jobs because I want to get a job. (Maria, 31)

Inherent in the planning regime established by the system is an underlying understanding that unemployed people only apply for jobs if they are required to do so; otherwise, they remain inactive or are perhaps even perceived as lazy. This formal moral assessment or test is also put on standby during the suspension, enabling them to actually experience another plan engagement which is more meaningful and autonomous. When the apparatus designed to construct self-responsible, active jobseekers is put on hold, paradoxically, we see active engagements associated with what is described as a heightened sense of agency.

The closure of employment offices and unemployment insurance funds due to the Covid-19 crisis also means that unemployed people do not have to attend compulsory interviews. According to Else, it has been a relief not to have to go to meetings at the employment office:

I've stopped going to job consultations at the employment office. And since I've never experienced the employment office as a helpful institution, that is, it's not something that has helped me in finding a job, then it isn't something I've missed much. (Else, 57)

To Else, living up to the demands and talking to PES has not been linked with getting closer to finding a job. In a sense, living up to system demands seems detached in relation to the overall goal. However, we also identified unemployed people who felt isolated and abandoned by PES, and thus, unable to "move on" towards a job as they were in need of support from job consultants. For a substantial minority of the people we interviewed, it is not simply the absence of the formal dimension of the suspended requirements that provides them with relief, but the experienced pressure of complying with them.

But immediately, applying for jobs, I can feel that, pheeew, it takes my breath away and I get really sad. I really easily start to cry when I talk about it. I feel them [her tears] now, sitting there, bothering me. And then the corona virus was a bit of a blessing, because it put these demands on hold. (Josefine, 29)

Josefine was overwhelmed by the unemployment experience, and has a hard time living up to the requirements of PES activation policies, so the suspension from the plan engagement provided her with a much-needed break.

The regime of planning eating into the regime of familiarity

Engagement necessarily involves making some sort of compromise between engaging in the various regimes. From the empirical material, we notice how the various regimes are enmeshed and sometimes collide or oppress one another. Thus we turn to the dynamics between the engagement in planning and other engagements. First, we see how the planning regime for some of our interviewees increasingly finds inspiration or even parasites on other regimes. For some, the engagement in planning, oscillating between “closed” and “open eyes” challenges and changes the familiar engagement. To give an example: Inge has always enjoyed painting and doing needlework and has considered gathering a group of people around this hobby, but since she became unemployed, she does not “have the mental energy for it” and painting a whole day would give her “a guilty conscience” (Inge, 57). Thus, engagements in the regime of familiarity are toned down or even prevented as investing in the regime of the plan takes up all one’s energy. Inge engages exclusively in the regime of the plan, since the engagement in familiarity activities no longer provides her with ease; rather, she is ridden by guilt, even though she admits that it is “nonsense”. While she has her eyes open and critically reflects on the “nonsense,” she has not been able set up boundaries between job search and time off. Similarly, Maria describes not being able to relax until she gets a job, and thus, the only thing she is able to do is to sit by her computer:

Well, sometimes I’ve maybe been sitting and looking [at the computer] and thought, now I *really* don’t know what to do. I *always* sit by my computer. . . . I can’t do anything else, before I get a job. If I knew tomorrow that from August 1st I’ll have a job, then I could say, okay, now I can sew this, I can plant these flowers in the garden, I can go home and visit my

parents and just enjoy my time with them. Well, all those things, I can't do those at all. Really, I need a job before I can enjoy myself. (Maria, 31)

The planning regime has in effect excluded engagement in other regimes, which frustrates Maria because she is unable to relax.

While the engagement in the planning regime excludes investing in other regimes for some, we also identify dynamics in which investing in, for instance, the exploratory regime is tweaked into the planning regime. For Lene, gardening work is requalified in the planning regime of developing business ideas. Lene has always enjoyed gardening but after becoming unemployed and participating in start-up courses, she suddenly sees this as an opportunity of developing a business within gardening consultancy work.

Privately, I have this interest in gardening in general, and hey, if you could... I've made some garden drawings for friends for free and then all of a sudden I thought, hey, what if you could develop that part? It could just be fun and exciting, and then I could use the qualifications from my higher education and then use the practical part, that I also really like. (Lene, 57)

Thus, Lene's private interest in gardening that she normally associates with relaxing and taking time off becomes part of engaging in the plan. The boundaries between the engagements in the various regimes can thus be viewed as dynamic or even porous.

Sacrificing planning for engagements in the regimes of familiarity and exploration

For some of our interviewees, the Danish government's suspension of rules and demands during lockdown in spring 2020 results in a vacuum that gives space to other kinds of engagements. These include taking a break altogether from applying for jobs and instead spending more time with one's family, home-educating children during the first Covid-19 lockdown, learning new skills and starting new leisure activities, etc. In various ways, they step out of the plan engagement.

A few of the interviewees seem to invest in their current employment situation with an explorative engagement, emphasizing how the slow pace of their current situation has led them to "check in with themselves" on how they want to spend their future (work) lives:

It was a good opportunity for me to think things through and find out what I should do for the rest of my life. Instead of just doing the same all my life. I actually spend time thinking about “what do I want” and try to ask myself “what would I like? (Ole, 50)

I’ve learnt more this half a year [while unemployed] about work life and my role in being a cogwheel in some machine, or whatever I was. . . . I would never have been able to genuinely feel the pulse of it unless I’d stood where I stand now not having a job. (Jesper, 34)

They both emphasize unemployment as a chance to figure out what they want to work in and what they have learnt about themselves more generally from being unemployed, Ole and Jesper approach the situation with the “openness towards the so-far unnoticed” characterizing explorative engagement.

As mentioned above, engagement in the explorative regime is characterized by enthusiasm and trust in the exploration of something new. Jesper and Ole’s enthusiastic expressions of the meaningfulness of the new insights about their lives and confidence that in time they will find a job illustrate this engagement. They have qualified their situation as one of (self) discovery providing new exciting insights about themselves. Jesper even expresses that had it not been for his time of unemployment, he would not have been able to pause his high-speed work life, “driving on a career track at 100 km per hour,” as he put it.

More concretely, Ole and his girlfriend dream about moving abroad, so Ole takes advantage of his time out of work to explore future possibilities for that, while Jesper explores mindfulness, meditation and Buddhism and has taken up an old passion for gymnastics. He stresses how his time being unemployed has taught him to explore and do things solely out of *desire and interest* contrary to doing things for the sake of achieving something (in work life). In short, he is exploring a meaningfulness of life that does not depend on employment status and that entails taking a critical look at his former work life.

While we have seen that some of the participants engage in their state of unemployment with exploration, for others the suspension gives space to a stronger engagement in the regime of familiarity. Some of the unemployed people enjoy this uniquely “demand-free” period and take a break from applying for jobs altogether. Instead, they spend time with family, helping family

members or friends with practical issues, babysitting relatives' children, home-schooling their own children or spending time on practical projects in their gardens or apartments. To give an example, Søren, a 40-year-old journalist, decides to not apply for jobs and instead focus on home-schooling his son, who is sent home from school as part of the lockdown.

I think it's been a huge gift to be able to spend so much time with my boy and home-educate him. I'll actually compare it with back when I was on parental leave with him, which was an amazing time. It is so lovely to have the opportunity to be so close to your child, right. And it also makes it possible to get a huge insight into where he is at in school. You do not get the possibility to explore that so closely during everyday life, right. In that way it's actually been an oasis. (Søren, 40)

Describing his time home-schooling his son as a “gift”, “an oasis” and a possibility to get “close” to his son's everyday school life points towards the good of ease and intimacy of familiar engagement. Thus, engaging in the regime of familiarity is expressed through presence, intimacy and relaxation, that unlike the regime of plans (as we have seen typically being part of the experience of unemployment) does not have a functional/instrumental quality to it.

Engagements in the regime of orders of worth

Finally, we turn to how the lack of achieving the good of the plan engagement can switch into engagement in the regime of orders of worth—both in the shape of evaluation turned inwards and outwards. With regards to the former, the failed engagement in plans leads to doubts about one's own abilities, which gives rise to a sense of inferiority or self-blame. For some, this involves downgrading one's value in the labor market, for example by seeking more widely in terms of geography, profession or salary, or seeking unpaid work. However, we also see that the Covid-19 crisis can provide the occasion for a reevaluation of the worth of the unemployed themselves.

For instance, the crisis offers an opportunity for Maria to openly talk about her formal status, as she experiences a greater understanding of being unemployed during Covid-19 and she explicitly remarks that the link between unemployment and lack of competences has been loosened:

Even though I didn't get hired, then I could kind of say, “Oh, I was just about to do a business Ph.D., but *then corona came*. So it has become a quite nice narrative. Somehow, it

is not about not being able to do anything. It is about “oh, but it was just external circumstances which caused that, it was such a pity. (Maria, 31)

The pandemic thus allows Maria (and others) to speak of unemployment as an accident beyond her control in opposition to the individualized and responsabilized understanding of unemployment inherent in the active turn.

Others emphasize the increased economic insecurity and the increased unemployment rate making the competition for sparse jobs even fiercer. As an effect of Covid-19, a new distinction between various groups of unemployed people has been introduced. Some distinguish between people who have become unemployed as an effect of Covid-19 and the people who were unemployed before:

I surely also think that since you hear that there’s a lot who got laid off, then it can also cause one to think about those who were available right before corona. Is it gonna get even more difficult for us, really? I think that is a bit tough, or very. It really is. (Lene, 57)

Lene speculates that there is a difference in worth (and, thus, in labor market value) between the two groups and that especially the pre-Covid-19 unemployed will suffer under these circumstances. This is discouraging to her. Inge speculates that the moral test of people becoming unemployed during Covid-19 will be milder and thus they will be considered more attractive job candidates:

So, I do know that there are a lot of other newly unemployed people, who will probably be chosen before me, so I also feel that I have been moved a couple of steps further back in the queue. . . . But it’s obviously something that people look for, when they look at these job applications, and then if someone writes that they were fired because of the corona crisis, then the employers are more willing to take them on than someone who’s been available before the corona crisis. (Inge, 57)

According to Inge, Covid-unemployed people enjoy more understanding but she feels that this change in worthiness is restricted to that group, rather than covering all unemployed people.

While we do see that the Covid-19 crisis to some extent shifts or tweaks the moral test of unemployed people, especially for those who became unemployed during Covid-19, the view on the unemployed more generally as a group still reflects the idea that unemployed people are a burden on society (Pultz, 2020). As an example, Else criticizes the unemployment system and how

unemployed people “are paid to stay away” instead of being put to use and she advocates for integrating unemployed people as volunteers during the Covid-19 crisis to a greater extent:

The public authorities could maybe also have done a bit more to integrate unemployed people. And also ask the unemployed people to volunteer during the corona crisis, because it would have helped present a positive picture that they can do something for society. Because, to be completely honest, as an unemployed person you get paid to stay away and not create problems. (Else, 57)

Similarly, Katrine reconsiders what she understands as a “good quality job” considering Covid-19, and the need to feel “useful” and contribute to society becomes pressing to her, which in some sense indicates that she “opens her eyes” anew: “I felt a strong need to sign up to Covid assistance. . . It would make so much sense to me to be able to be useful and someone who’s beneficial, someone who is needed” (Katrine, 27).

Another example of critical engagements in the regime of orders of worth is Lene, whose own experiences have led her to be highly critical of ageism in the sense of age discrimination of the unemployed in job application processes:

There’s been an interview with the new Minister of Employment, Peter Hummelgaard, where he is upset about the fact that it’s so difficult for people in my age group to get a job. So, I thought, well, if he thinks like that, well that is lovely, then I will just write to him. . . . So I also wrote to the Ministry of Employment, and they thought, hey, that’s a really good idea, go out and find someone who wants to put money into it. (Lene, 57)

Lene is proactive in trying to address problematic conditions for older unemployed people. She appreciates having a Minister of Employment who is aware and brings up the issue; however, she is disappointed that he is not willing to finance the event. At the same time, her engagement in the regime of worth can also be viewed as engaging in the plan, because most likely, if she managed to find funding for the event, she would put it on her CV demonstrating entrepreneurial abilities highly valued in current labor markets. Again, we see that the lines between the various regimes are not clear-cut, but in movement, and dynamic with investments in one regime flooding into another one.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we set out to explore how unemployed people engage in various regimes during the Covid-19 crisis using the framework of regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2011a). Doing so made it possible to identify the complex and versatile engagement of unemployed people. Taking the unemployed person as a vantage point and applying a framework of engagement has made it possible to contribute to the wider aim of exploring the unemployment experience in all its complexity (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Demazière, 2020; Pultz, 2017).

Unemployment is a versatile and ambiguous experience moving in between regimes and between “closing eyes” and “opening eyes”. First, being active is not simply an obligation that derives from the instruments of the employment office. Since being unemployed has always entailed a degree of devaluation and a sense of inferiority, job searching constitutes the main means to exit this status regardless of obligations and techniques in the PES (Demazière, 2017). In a country such as Denmark, with a long history of the protestant work ethic, these constitute deep-rooted norms and values. The often instrumental and standardized obligations to job search that seem integral to the active turn thus establish a potential tension with the unemployed person’s own sense of a meaningful job search (Demazière, 2020). Second, unemployed people are simply confronted with everyday pragmatic needs to make a living in which getting a job is often one of many other elements such as caring for children and family, social life, paying bills, daily routines, participating in the local community, etc. Both elements of the experience of unemployment mean that complying with obligations and “playing the role of job-seeker” are not tantamount to acceptance. Unemployed people have been shown here to have deep reflexive critical evaluations of the PES and the situation they are in, and the Covid-19 crisis may amplify these ambiguities.

On the one hand, the instruments of PES push towards “closed eyes” engagement in its planning and valuation of the unemployed. On the other hand, for most of the unemployed people, the uncertainty about “what is” and what will become implies a state of “opening one’s eyes” in all engagements. The Covid-19 crisis has also been an event that to a degree has put the activation policies to the test; making it visible what aspects are usually associated with stress, pressure and surveillance and what aspects are missed such as support. In addition, the Covid-19 crisis has tweaked and turned the moral test of unemployed people, as unemployment has now been associated more with external and structural factors, thus opposing the individualizing and responsabilizing dynamics associated with the active turn dominating the last three or four decades (Hansen, 2019; Pultz, 2017). Hence, it has become slightly more acceptable to say that you are

unemployed. However, new polarizing dynamics have also become visible between people unemployed before and during Covid-19, with the latter group viewed as more attractive job candidates and issues of worthiness embedded in that distinction, with corona-unemployed people also being viewed as more worthy and less to blame for their misfortune.

We find that PES promotes an engagement in the planning regime reflected in the way the unemployed conduct themselves. At the systemic level we find that the regime of the plan dominates in the construction of the active jobseeker. For some, investing in the plan is an exclusive strategy making it impossible to feel at ease in the familiarity regime. Increasingly, the regime of the plan draws on aspects of the regime of familiarity and also on the exploratory regime as unemployed people must be continually optimizing their human capital in the quest for a job. While we identify that the regime of the plan dominates the other regimes in the activation policies enacted by the PES, we also see how the regime of familiarity, and perhaps to a lesser extent the regime of exploration, is increasingly absorbed by regime of the plan and thus instrumentalized in relation to the goal of finding a job. Our results are aligned with and add to Pultz (2017) and Pultz and Sharone (2020), who have shown how social relationships are instrumentalized in the employment system by encouraging people to take advantage of social relationships (including friends and family) in their job search (known as “networking”). Perhaps Covid-19 has accentuated this dynamic, as everyday life during lockdown was narrowed down to a limited space and a limited number of relations.

Existing studies have pointed to how the unemployed are thereby encouraged to conduct themselves as small enterprises and in that sense become their own brand or company, eroding the boundaries between private and work life (Pultz, 2018; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). From an engagement perspective, this move involves increasingly requalifying other engagements (familiarity, explorative) and absorbing them in the plan engagement, i.e., planning for a job. The study thus points to the importance of these goods that are often neglected by PES as well as by scholars individualizing unemployment. Interestingly, we also identified unemployed people who *qua* unemployment were able to engage in the regime of exploration and familiarity, critically assessing their work life and appreciating a slow pace and investing in personal relationships just for the sake of it. Such critical reflections have also been identified before the pandemic in relation to unemployed people (Pultz & Mørch, 2015), but perhaps the context of the pandemic has enabled or facilitated them. This variation underlines the importance of considering the heterogeneity among

unemployed people, as Wanberg and Marchese (1994) had already highlighted, and extends the heterogeneity beyond the unemployed person to include their social setting and circumstances.

Within the framework of engagement, we can identify how some unemployed people step out of the planning regime and engage in the regimes of engagement and exploration—not with the aim of optimizing human capital but to live life in a separate way. Among our interviewees, the unemployed people who were exclusively able to invest in the planning regime were also the ones who had the hardest time “taking time off”. Spending time away from job searching and stepping out of the plan and participating in other regimes seemed to provide people with a sense of joy. This finding is in line with Pultz and Teasdale (2017), Demazière (2020), and Eschweiler & Pultz (2021). Having hobbies or engaging in meaningful often unpaid activities detached from the job search is identified as important for well-being and agency (Pultz & Teasdale, 2017; Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021). Demazière (2020) identified a successful job search strategy among former unemployed people as investing limited emotional resources in the job search to avoid a strong sense of defeat and rejection thus resulting in making better job candidates. Especially for PES, this might be worth considering as strategies so far seem to go in one direction: cultivating more and more aspects of other regimes in the planning regime and leaving little or no room free from job searching.

Further, in a political context where the unemployed is predominantly portrayed as an inactive and passive being in need of being governed firmly, our study points to the agency and reflexive competences of some persons. The study thus accentuates the need to listen to the voices of the unemployed, in research as well as in policymaking.

In closing, a few limitations deserve mentioning. An interview study risks missing some types of engagement, in particular engagements that are characterized as primarily non-verbal and intimate. Future studies should therefore pursue ethnographic methods (e.g. observation, shadowing) to uncover this. Interviewing in times of crisis sheds light on the current moment; however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish clearly between what characterized the unemployment experience in Denmark generally, and what is specific and perhaps even changed because of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, insight into the workings of activation policies through their absence should be interpreted with some caution.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Interviews	Sex	Age	Education	Type of unemployment	Economical assistance	Occupation before unemployment
Josefine	F	29	Sociologist	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Newly Qualified
Laura	F	26	Communication	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Newly Qualified
Else	F	58	Ethnografi and communication	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Managers
Leif	M	44	Sociologist	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Elementary Occupations
Lene	F	57	Danish and history	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Paul	M	54	Mechanical engineer	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Maiken	F	29	History and communication	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Pia	F	48	Civil engineer	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Sofie	F	27	Danish and history	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Newly Qualified
Katrine	F	27	Peadagogy Studies	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Newly Qualified
Søren	M	40	Journalist	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Maria	F	31	Architect	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Professional
Martin	M	60	Butcher	Corona-unemployed	Unemployment insurance	Plant and machine operators and assemblers
Niels	M	59	Industrial operater	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Plant and machine operators and assemblers
Ole	M	50	Ingenier	Unemployed before corona	Unemployment insurance	Plant and machine operators and assemblers
Per	M	56	Lower secondary school	Corona-unemployed	Unemployment insurance	Technicians and associate professionals
Susan	F	31	Gartner	Corona-unemployed	Social assistance	Elementary Occupations
Hans	M	51	Lower secondary school	Corona-unemployed	Social assistance	Service and sales workers
Charlotte	F	30	BA. in Marketing Management	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Technicians and associate professionals
Jens	M	56	Office assistant	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Clerical support workers
Inge	F	57	Office assistant	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Clerical support workers
Karen	F	52	Upper secondary school	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Clerical support workers
Jesper	M	34	BA. in Global business	Corona-unemployed	Social assistance	Technicians and associate professionals
Nina	F	30	Computer science	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Professionals
Anders	M	32	Butcher	Unemployed before corona	Social assistance	Service and sales workers