



Do Welfare Conditionalities Always Undermine  
Autonomy? Understanding Young Unemployed  
People'S Experiences of Mandatory Activation.

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Rasmus Schjødt

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**Title:** Do welfare conditionalities always undermine autonomy? Understanding young unemployed people's experiences of mandatory activation.

## **Abstract**

Governments are investing large amounts of money in active labour market policies. Yet, results are mixed, and despite a large literature examining the effects of these policies, we still do not have a good theoretical understanding of the mechanisms through which active labour market policies affect the behaviour of welfare recipients. This paper contributes to building a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding how active labour market policies affect the behaviour of unemployed people. In doing so, it contributes to the emerging literature showing a discrepancy between justifications and underlying assumptions of welfare conditionalities and the lived experiences of welfare recipients. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and data from a qualitative longitudinal case study of young unemployed people in Denmark, the paper examines the following research question: under which circumstances do young unemployed people internalise external demands to participate in mandatory job placements? The analysis shows that successful internalisation depends on whether young people feel that they are listened to and respected, that they are able to establish a trusting relationship with caseworkers and that a rationale for participation is established through dialogue with caseworkers. These findings provide important lessons for policies to better support young people to enter education or employment.

## **Key words**

Welfare conditionality, motivation, self-determination theory, job placement, unemployed youth

### **1. Introduction**

Governments are investing large amounts of money in active labour market policies. Yet, results are mixed, and despite a large literature examining the effects of these policies, we still do not have a good theoretical understanding of exactly *how* active labour market policies affect the behaviour of welfare recipients. One apparent paradox is that active labour market policies aim to move people off benefits by making them more self-reliant, but does so through policies that, by seeking to control people's behaviour through conditionalities and sanctions, risk undermining people's sense of autonomy. This paper contributes to building a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding how active labour market policies affect the behaviour of unemployed people, and whether it is possible to implement active labour market policies in a way that supports, rather than undermines unemployed people's sense of autonomy.

In doing so, the paper contributes to the emerging social policy literature on the lived experience of welfare recipients, with a particular focus on the experience of welfare conditionalities. Welfare conditionality refers to requirements to meet particular obligations, or behave in certain ways, in order to access welfare benefits (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Behavioural conditionalities has been a central part of what has been called the 'activation turn' in many developed welfare states since the mid-1990s (McGann, Danneris, & O'Sullivan 2019). These policies are often, implicitly or explicitly, based on a model of the welfare subject as inactive, not motivated to find work, and therefore in need of 'activation' through incentives or deterrents (Wright, 2016, p. 237). 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 & Nielsen 2018; Danneris & Caswell 2019; Patrick, 2014; Wright, 2016; McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Wright & Patrick, 2019; Patrick, 2020). This research has so far been predominantly empirically focused, and a fruitful way forward for the field may therefore be to explore more comprehensive theoretical understandings of why people experience welfare conditionalities in different ways. This paper contributes to this effort by introducing a theory of basic psychological needs and motivation as a way to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experience of welfare conditionalities. Specifically, the analysis explores the research question: under which circumstances do young unemployed people internalise external demands to participate in mandatory job placements?

## **2. A Self-Determination perspective on active labour market policies**

The concept of motivation plays a key role in justifications for welfare conditionalities, with policies arguably still primarily based on the behaviourist thinking of the 1960s, with its focus on motivating people through external rewards and punishments (Skinner, 1971; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 82). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a different perspective, where motivation is seen as related to fulfilment of basic psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 14). The theory has been used to understand what drives human actions in contexts such as parenting, education, health care, physical education and work and organisations, but so far only to a very limited extent in relation to active labour market policies (Ryan and Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004; Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2021).

SDT contains six ‘mini theories’, one of which is the so-called “Organismic Integration Theory”, which provides a theory about how people internalise and integrate external demands (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 179). The theory provides explanations for why people carry out activities which are not intrinsically interesting, and is therefore interesting in relation to better understanding why people may participate in mandatory activation such as job placements. The theory describes a continuum of internalisation, ranging from least autonomous to most autonomous, with internalisation defined as “the process of taking in values, beliefs or behavioral regulations from external sources and transforming them into one’s own” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 180). This continuum describes the extent to which individuals have integrated a social requirement (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 182). Four different types of 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 which 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 are no external pressure being applied. This is often accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt (Ryan and 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 values of education and work (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 188).

4. *Integrated* motivation is the motivation for doing things because of norms that have been successfully internalised. This is the case when external demands have been integrated in ways which fits into one’s world view and is coherent with one’s values. Ownership means that regulation is experienced as coming from the self and as authentic, not feeling 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 (Vanstenkiste et al. 2004; Ryan and Deci 2017, p. 191). As mentioned above, the theory describes a continuum, and the different types of motivation should therefore be seen as ideal types. Empirically, a specific person in a specific situation will experience them as overlapping to some extent.

**Table 1: The Organismic Integration Theory motivation types**

Behaviour	Non-self-determined					Self-determined
<b>Motivation</b>	Amotivation		Extrinsic motivation			Intrinsic motivation
<b>Regulatory style</b>	Non-regulation	External regulation	Introjected regulation	Identified regulation	Integrated regulation	Intrinsic regulation
<b>Regulatory process</b>	Non-intentional Nonvaluing 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

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

According to SDT, the process of integration functions optimally under conditions which support people’s basic psychological needs. SDT posits that human beings have three basic psychological needs, which must be satisfied for psychological interest, development and wellness to be sustained: the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 10). *Autonomy* is defined as the need to self-regulate ones’ experiences and actions (Ryan and Deci 2017, p. 10). *Competence* in SDT refers to “our basic need to feel effectance and mastery” (Ryan and Deci 2017, p. 11), and *Relatedness* entails “feeling socially connected” (Ryan and Deci 2017, p. 11), including by feeling cared for by others. However, it also includes feelings of belonging and feeling significant among others, something that often arises from feeling able to contribute in a meaningful way (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Theoretically, conditionalities in ALMPs could affect basic psychological needs and motivation in different ways. The concept of *autonomy* would seem particularly important in relation to the experience of welfare conditionalities, as these significantly restrict unemployed people’s ability to make choices about how they want to spend their time (Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2021, p. 5). We would therefore not expect the context of imposed activities to allow fulfilment of basic psychological needs or result in autonomous motivation (Kampen and Tonkens, 2019; Rafass, 2017; Friedli and Stearn, 2015).

More broadly, the question is whether active labour market policies under a regime of welfare conditionalities is able to provide a social context that supports positive internalisation of the demand to participate in activation. In the next section, I briefly present the case of Danish active labour market policies for young unemployed people. I focus in particular on job placements as a

common type of policy tool. Subsequently I examine under which conditions young people are able to integrate demands to participate in job placements.

### **3. Context: activating Danish unemployed citizens aged 18-30**

It is a fundamental requirement in Danish social- and labour market policies that people who wish to receive benefits have to be available to the labour market. In practice this entails a requirement to participate in various types of activation, generally involving job placements and/or various courses. Participation is mandatory, and non-compliance may be followed by a sanction if proper justification for absence is not provided. Sanctions can for example include withdrawal of benefits for three days. If a person fails to comply with the requirements several times, benefits can be withdrawn for a period of up to three months. Although participation in activities is mandatory, the preferences of citizens should be taken into account and sanctions should only be applied if they are expected to lead to a higher likelihood of the person entering employment.

Although Danish active labour market policies involve quite detailed legislative requirements, implementation is the responsibility of municipal governments, and there is considerable variation in implementation between municipalities. In the municipality where the research took place, most courses are provided by external actors, including both private companies and non-profit organisations. In general, the Danish context is a case of a system with a high level of decentralisation to municipalities and a high level of discretion for caseworkers in the application of welfare conditionalities.

Specific conditionalities apply for young unemployed people under the age of 30 who do not have an education that provides labour market qualifications. Since reforms in 2013, this group has not been eligible for ordinary social assistance benefits, but may instead be eligible to receive a so-called Education Benefit ('Uddannelseshjælp') at a lower benefit level. The Education Benefit comes with various types of conditionalities, including mandatory participation in meetings with caseworkers and participation in various activities. Activities may include short job placements, subsidised employment, mandatory full time work and participation in training courses. Courses include job search courses, psychoeducation courses for young people with mental health problems, physical education courses and various skills development courses. These may be used separately or in combination with e.g. part time job placements.

The nature of caseworker meetings varies depending on the situation of the individual young person. In some cases people may have very frequent (e.g. bi-weekly) meetings with their primary caseworker (called 'education consultants'). Those primarily focused on finding job placements may have frequent contact with 'job consultants' who are caseworkers specialised in finding job placements. On the other hand, people who are participating in external courses may have very less frequent contact with caseworkers (e.g. every 3-6 months), but very frequent meetings with contact persons from the course provider. Meetings normally take place in-person at the Jobcentre, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most meetings during 2020 and 2021 (when data was collected) were conducted either over the phone or using Microsoft Teams. Frontline workers – both those employed by the municipality and those employed by external course providers – may have various backgrounds, with only some being trained social workers.

Job placements are an important part of active labour market policies in Denmark in general. The majority of young unemployed people will at some point experience a job placement, and many will participate in more than one placement. Internationally, this type of activation comes in many different forms, and with different purposes, e.g. in the Netherlands (Eleveld, 2019) and in the UK, where one previous study showed that job placements made up 75-90 per cent of activities of private welfare-to-work contractors (Rafass 2017, p. 355-6). In the Danish context, job placements are framed as 'internships', and are relatively short, for some groups only four weeks (although with possibility of extension with additional four week periods, if new tasks can be identified) and for others up to 13 weeks. For the group of young people particularly, job placements can have multiple objectives, such as providing work experience with the aim of making participants more attractive to employers; providing participants with experience of particular work environments with the aim of guiding them towards choosing an education; providing structure to the lives of participants, and providing soft skills (e.g. showing up on time, being part of a work place).

#### **4. Data and methods**

The analysis is based on qualitative longitudinal research, involving frequent in-depth interviews over a period of one year with 18 young unemployed people in a Danish municipality. Participants were recruited through a combination of invitation letters sent directly to each individual by the municipality (6 interviewees) and through in-person presentations by the author to participants in courses at three different external course providers, where participants were able to sign up for the project (12 individuals). Participants were selected based on their status as recipients of Education Benefits, age and gender. I did not explicitly include vulnerability criteria for selecting participants, but because of the recruitment through the course providers, most interviewees (16) have mental health issues (mainly depression and/or anxiety).

Participants were interviewed every 2-3 months for up to 12 months, with between one and five interviews per person, carried out in the period between June 2020 and September 2021. This resulted in a total of 53 semi-structured interviews, with a total of 38.5 hours of recorded material and 973 pages of transcripts. Interviews can be characterised as falling somewhere between semi-structured and unstructured: they were based on broad questions, encouraging interviewees to talk in detail about their experience of receiving benefits.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and case analysis. The first part of the analysis, describing different types of motivation expressed by young people, is based on cross-sectional thematic analysis of all 53 interviews. Coding was done in Nvivo, using closed coding based on the categories of motivation described by Self-Determination Theory. The subsequent analysis of how internalisation happens is based on case analysis, with specific experiences of job placements as the unit of analysis. While data collection and analysis were guided by pre-selected theoretical concepts and expectations, the open-ended qualitative data collection allowed for unexpected findings. As such, Self-Determination Theory provides the perspective through which the data is viewed, but the data collection also allows for findings which falls outside the theoretical expectations.

## 5. Why do young people participate in activation?

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. There is a substantial critical literature on the use of conditionalities, in which conditionalities are described as mandatory requirements, which citizens only participate in because they have to in order to avoid sanctions (Davis, 2019; Fletcher & Flint, 2018; Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Rafass, 2017). This is what is conceptualised as “external motivation” in Self-Determination Theory.

I did not find this type of motivation to dominate 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 activation. That is, they were able to accept participation as something they chose for themselves, because it makes sense for them. A total of 20 of the 32 cases of job placement experiences identified can be best described as cases of identified motivation. There were however also negative experiences, which helps illuminate when and how the internalisation process fails. These included two cases best described as introjected motivation, six cases best described as external motivation and three cases best described as amotivation. In the following, I provide more detail on each type of motivation, with examples from the cases.

*Integrated and intrinsic motivation* are the two most autonomous forms of motivation. 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 job placements to be often experienced as joyful in and of themselves, as they are usually explicitly described as a means to an end (as described above). However, one interviewee described his participation in a job placement, working as assistant to the janitors in the building of a course provider, in a way which comes close to describing intrinsic motivation.

*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. So, it is positive to get this experience that I can actually do something. And I can add value, even if I haven't necessarily tried everything before.*

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 – this young man 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.

*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 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.. [social worker] 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.*

In this case, a young woman who has been following a psychoeducation course at a non-profit service provider 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 psychoeducation towards becoming ready to start education. As such, it is understood by the young people to be something they have to do, but also something which they perceive to have a degree of control over. In this case, the young woman is able to make suggestions for possible job placements that she is interested in, and based on the 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.

*Introjected motivation* refers to carrying out activities as a result 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 engage in, and one's actual interests. While not a typical experience, the two deviant cases showing this type of motivation are useful for illustrating how active labour market policies can lead to introjected motivation which can have severely negative consequences for vulnerable people.

*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... 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.*

This is a case of a young man who had succeeded in convincing both himself and caseworkers that he would benefit from participation in a job placement at a kindergarden, 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 severe negative effects of job placements. In this case, the introjected motivation as a result of internal pressure to adhere to expectations of making progress towards participating in the labour market, and the participation in an ill-suited job placement that followed, had a disastrous effect on this young man, 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.

*Q: But what is the purpose for you to do that internship?*

*A: I don't know. It is just something I have to do.*

*Q: But why.. do you know why your caseworker suggested it?*

*A: 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.*

Here, a young man shows very clearly a complete inability to make sense of the job placement in which he is participating. He has no sense of ownership of the decision 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. 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 would like 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, even if there is no explicit coercion and threat of sanctions.

*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 has been undermined to an extent where it becomes difficult to embrace the activity (Ravn 2021, p. 49). Among the unemployed young people, this feeling towards job placements usually arise because of mental health issues such as depression and stress, which give rise to feelings of lacking the necessary competence to carry out activities.

The above descriptive analysis of young people's experiences shows how Self-Determination Theory 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 in this case study described various degrees of 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 next sections will examine these different experiences in more depth to explore what characterises the situations that supports or prevents positive internalisation.

## **6. When are active labour market policies conducive to positive internalisation?**

SDT enables theoretical predictions to be made as to whether aspects of a social context are likely to support satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and thereby support the internalisation process. For the purpose of this analysis, the rules, regulations and activities which together make

up active labour market policies can be considered to constitute a particular social context. The theory characterise social contexts in terms of the extent to which they are autonomy supportive, effectance supporting and relationally supportive (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 12). In general, contexts which support autonomy are those that provide choice and encourage self-regulation (i.e. the ability to act in accordance with ones desires). Contexts that support competence are those which provide structure and positive feedback, whereas contexts which support relatedness are those which offer the caring support of others (Ryan and Deci 2017). These expectations provide a starting point for analysing when and how the context of active labour market policies can support autonomous forms of motivation.

When analysing the cases of job placement experience, one of the circumstances that appear most important for understanding whether successful internalisation happens, is whether the young person experiences *that frontline workers listen to them and respect 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."*

In this case, a young woman 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 which is meaningful to her.

On the contrary, the same young woman described a sense of controlled motivation for another job placement subsequently, 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 adverse to job placements as such, but it have 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 psychoeducation 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 to gain more knowledge about different education and job paths. The 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.

Another important aspect of the relation between the young person and frontline workers 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 (in addition, several have ADHD diagnoses).

*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.*

In this case, the interviewee 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 very few hours a week in a shop can be a source of stress and anxiety for someone suffering from severe social anxiety, and they 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, because this exacerbates fears of failure. The trust in the frontline worker needs to counteract the fear of potentially being forced to complete four weeks of anxiety provoking job placement, or having to drop out prematurely and face the consequences of not complying with the conditionalities.

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 describe a difference in attitude, with municipal caseworkers more likely to make specific suggestions for activities, and non-profit employees more prone to asking questions and maintaining focus on the safety and wellbeing of the young person. Caseworkers are in many cases perceived to be more concerned with internal “system” needs than with individual needs, although there are also big differences between individual caseworkers.

*I don't know of course. I haven't been a caseworker. But I think, maybe, that there is a different kind of pressure on them to get us off and going again. Also that we almost don't have any relation with [caseworker]. I have only talked to her a few times. I can count the number of times on one hand I am pretty sure. With [non-profit frontline worker] it is a completely different relation, so I think she sees me more as a complete person. Where I think that [caseworker] just sees me as another citizen in the line.*

On the contrary, the non-profit worker is perceived as being primarily concerned with the young person's needs. In another case a young man who had just dropped out of university and were diagnosed with depression was offered a job placement at the first meeting with his caseworker. He describes why he did not decline to participate at first, despite not feeling at all capable of completing a job placement at that time:

*I think I was just like, 'well, I just have to do what they think'. I mean, it was not like a violation at all, it was just like, 'okay, this is what is required, I will go along with that'.*

This experience shows how the initial impulse of most of these young people is to follow along with what they perceive to be the demands, and that it therefore requires further discussions, and active listening on the part of caseworkers, to detect amotivation. What is perhaps surprising is how well the Danish system of active labour market policies for young people allows this to happen, despite on the surface being a welfare conditionality regime with a strong focus on pushing people quickly into employment.

The feeling of choice is also related to the perceived attitude of caseworkers. In the quote below, a young woman describes the feeling of meeting a caseworker who respects her needs and do not have a hidden agenda to push her out into activities as quickly as possible.

*Well, I just feel that she.. a bit like with the other guy, does not have some intention of pushing me into something that I am not ready for. That she knows, that if she pushes me into something, some kind of education or something, where I may not be ready, then I may be here again in a year. And I just feel.. like, really that you are respected in a way. And that they consider you as an individual, and don't put me in some box.*

What this young woman describes is at the core of the trusting relationship: the feeling that the caseworker has her interests at heart, and will act in accordance with what is best for her. In general, it is clear that when young people perceive that job placements are arranged because it is a requirement to do so, or because job 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 taking into account the needs and preferences of the young person.

In the two cases of introjected motivation, the young persons also describe caseworkers listening to their needs, but 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. However, it should also be clear that this is not just about an individual failure to voice own needs. Even when flexible and good at listening to the needs of citizens, caseworkers still work within a system based on an assumption of progress towards education and work. This is the fundamental expectation that the young people are facing. The majority of the young people, and in particular those with a tendency to want to please, are therefore eager to show progress, and they perceive acceptance of activity offers as part of this.

The cases of introjected motivation shows clearly the importance of a caseworker approach that does not reinforce the expectation 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. The act of asking questions can be perceived as either controlling or supportive, depending on whether it is perceived to reflect a genuine interest or as a way to guide the conversation in a specific direction that suits the needs of the frontline worker. Table 2 provides an overview of experiences which are perceived to be supportive and controlling respectively.

**Table 2: Young people’s perceptions of mandatory job placements as supportive and controlling respectively**

Supportive	Controlling
<i>Feeling listened to and respected</i>	
Listens to citizen preferences, and adapts interventions accordingly.	Emphasises own suggestions for interventions and actions that the citizen could take.
Asks "how are you, and what is realistic in this situation".	"Tells me what my mental situation is, and what I should do."
<i>Establishing a trusting relationship</i>	
Maintains eye contact.	No eye contact, uses formal tone and language,
"Talks to me like a human being".	uses "municipal language".
Follows through on agreements.	No follow up on agreements.
Shows empathy and caring about needs of the citizen.	No display of empathy and caring about the needs of the citizen.
Takes the necessary time to meet with citizens.	Limited time and contact.
Reaches out regularly.	
<i>Establishing a rationale through dialogue</i>	
Perceived focus on the needs of the citizen.	Perceived focus on internal needs.
Show a genuine interest in needs and preferences of citizens.	Steers the conversation in a direction favourable to the case worker.
Practices active listening.	Do not make space for citizens to open up about their preferences.

**7. Discussion**

It is apparent from the above analysis that the relationship between the young person and frontline workers is of critical importance for the question of whether welfare conditionalities are perceived as controlling or supporting. This finding is in keeping with previous findings from qualitative longitudinal research with welfare recipients in the UK and the Netherlands (Wright, 2016; Kampen and Tonkens 2019). Wright (2016) found that a number of factors related to the interaction between frontline workers and citizens mediated how activation affected ‘active agency’. These included: being treated with dignity and respect; being listened to sympathetically and attentively (ideally during long or flexible appointments); being understood; being appreciated holistically as a person; receiving consistent advice from a named advisor; feeling empowered and being ‘in control’ of the interaction. Kampen and Tonkens (2019) describe similar findings from the Netherlands, with interactions with case workers crucial for feelings of ‘empowerment’.

What the use of Self-Determination Theory adds to these findings is a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding exactly why these different factors are related to feelings of autonomy and agency. For example, Kampen and Tonkens (2019) use the concept of

'empowerment' for understanding unemployed people's experience of mandatory activation, but do not define or theorise the meaning of this concept. SDT offers a coherent theoretical framework and a comprehensive ongoing empirical research programme that can aid the understanding of people's experiences of activation as either supportive or detrimental to the need for autonomy.

According to Self-Determination Theory, providing good reasons for an external demand supports integrated internalisation, and thereby the need for autonomy (Vansteenkiste, Aelterman et al. 2018: 39-40). My analysis supports this to some extent, although it is also clear from the data that simply being given a reason is not sufficient to support autonomy. Rather, successful internalisation requires a dialogue to establish a common understanding between the young person and the caseworker.

In the cases of external motivation, interviewees describe a lack of trust in caseworkers and job consultants, and a feeling that they are more concerned with "the needs of the system" than with the needs of the person in front of them. This is likely to explain the failure to establish a common understanding about the rationale for participation in job placements.

On the contrary, most of the young people express an understanding of the rationale for participation in job placements. This understanding emerges through dialogues with frontline workers, who listen to the wishes of the young persons and frame job placements in alignment with these. This finding supports other recent research on Danish active labour market policies, showing how making sense of activation is a social process with contributions from both citizens and frontline workers (Dall & Jørgensen, 2021; Hansen & Nielsen, 2021).

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper sought to contribute to a better theoretical understanding of the circumstances under which welfare recipients experience conditionalities as supportive of basic psychological needs, and when they are detrimental. Existing research has shown mixed effects of active labour market policies, and that there is a misalignment between the assumptions behind the use of welfare conditionalities and the lived experience of benefit recipients. The present analysis shows how SDT can add a fruitful theoretical perspective to our understanding of unemployed people's experience of welfare conditionalities.

In terms of how findings conform to the theoretical expectations, it is surprising that welfare conditionalities are not generally experienced as violating people's need for autonomy. I find that interviewees are able to successfully internalise the requirement to participate in job placements when they feel that they are listened to and respected, when they are able to establish a trusting relationship with caseworkers and when a rationale for participation is established through dialogue with caseworkers. In other words, whether conditionalities are perceived as controlling or supportive, depends to a large extent on how they are implemented in the specific meeting between frontline workers and citizens.

These findings provide important knowledge for the design and implementation of welfare conditionalities. They show both the possibility and the significance of implementing interventions

in a way that provides citizens with a feeling of agency and self-determination. In the absence of this, citizens risk being left with feelings of anger, disempowerment and demotivation, and interventions implemented in this way may therefore have the opposite effect than intended.

While the individual relationship between frontline workers and citizens is the most important factor for understanding people's experience of activation, it is also clear that the policy and implementation context can create circumstances that makes it easier or harder for frontline workers to establish a good relationship with citizens. This includes for example factors such as caseloads, which affect time available for each client, incentive structures such as use of performance indicators and the professional backgrounds of frontline workers and their training (Caswell et al. pp. 5-7). A fruitful way forward for research on welfare conditionalities might be more comparative analysis of the lived experience of benefit recipients in different contexts, which would be able to shed more light on the significance of these different contextual factors.

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