Recognition Struggles of Young Danes Under the Work First Paradigm - a Study of Restricted and Generalised Agency

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Abstract

Work has become ‘a normatively charged concept, one in which normative expectations and the current form of a society’s relation to work have become sedimented’ (Jaeggi, 2016:70). Critical theorists have observed how work is linked to recognition and self-realization. Consequently, they see how unemployment can lead to a sense of alienation. Exploring the social practices among young entrepreneurial creative people receiving unemployment benefits in Denmark, we pose the following research question: how do young people in the unemployment benefit system work within and against the system? Based on interviews with young unemployed people conducted as part of a PhD (Pultz, 2017), we aim to unfold how the young people challenge the ‘work first paradigm’, including resisting the neoliberal understanding that human worth is determined by employment status. We combine insight from critical theory in order to understand the current work pathologies and apply the critical psychological concepts of restricted and expansive agency to shed light on how our sample engages in recognition struggles. They do so by seeking to gain influence over conditions and simultaneously resisting structures that restrict subjective agency in the spheres of love, achievement and rights. We will use this combined macro- and micro-level theoretical framework to analyse subjective reasoning for expansive agency embedded in an institutional and political context that reflects the work pathology diagnosis and produces its own dilemmas that need further understanding. Combining critical theory, more specifically Axel Honneth’s work on recognition with critical psychology, allows us to move beyond deterministic holds and to improve our understanding of agentic potential in society. Improving our understanding of how young unemployed people work within and against the system helps us better understand how individuals navigate the complex relations between societal structures and the self.

Keywords Work first paradigm · Unemployment · Critical theory · Critical psychology · Restrictive and expansive agency

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Introduction

The Danish welfare state combines marketisation and social protection, thus including an element of solidarity through the redistributive welfare state. However, with austerity and new public management, welfare concerns such as unemployment are less seen as the result of structural inequalities than of individual responsibility (i.e. Daguerre, 2007). The public notion of work and related welfare schemes increasingly narrow to the goal of labour activation, as the ‘work first’ strategy has paved the way for an activation regime associated with neoliberal characteristics (Kristensen, 2016). For the last three decades, the activation paradigm has shaped the unemployment system in Denmark as well as in many other Western countries (Immervoll & Scarpetta, 2012). The activation paradigm has been associated with the construction of the active jobseeker rather than a passive recipient (Boland, 2016). It is composed by active labour market measures targeting unemployed people in order to incentivise them to find a job, sooner rather than later (Andersen, 2020). This development is reflected in a myriad of schemes for training and work integration, and strict demands on the unemployed to document their efforts to increase their employability, shifting focus from the right to work to the obligation to work. The responsabilization of the unemployed citizen has been associated with the increased likelihood of self-blame asking oneself; what is wrong with me as I am unable to find a job and support myself? (Newman, 1988; Pultz, 2017; Sharone, 2013).

The manifold negative effects of unemployment on mental and physical health (McKee & Ryan, 2005; Vaansteenkiste et al., 2005) have been linked to normative ideas about work and human worth in a given society. Increasingly, employment and work have been associated with identity and social status (Beck, 1992) and unemployment has been associated with shame (Pultz, 2018). Neoliberalism and globalisation are challenging the normative expectations our societies have in relation to work. Feminists criticise the narrow view on work as contract labour or paid labour (i.e. Weeks, 2011) leading to an increase of social exclusion when regarded as non-productive. In the context of capitalism and welfare states’ increasing focus on contribution, unemployment is linked to the worthiness of the individual rather than on failures in the structures surrounding the individual (Hansen, 2019). This is intimately linked to the responsabilization of the citizen (Pultz, 2017).

Combining a critical theory and critical psychology perspective, we start by describing the critical theory assessment of work pathologies, enabled by the neoliberal turn also in social policy. Generally understood as a theory of culture and philosophy, this assessment of ‘the social’ sets the frame for agency and assessments of the self (Fultner, 2017, p. 523). We turn to critical psychology and its focus on the standpoint of the subject to explore how efforts to promote individual notions of ‘the good life’ are interrelated with the employment system and cause frictions in notions of agency. We work with Axel Honneth’s understanding of the good life, expressed in recognition, and the concept of conflictual collaboration (Axel, 2011) when examining the struggle of recognition that individuals engage in. This struggle can include attempts to challenge or expand the existing system with which individuals are connected.

The Danish Unemployment System

The so-called Danish model consists of traditionally strong labour unions and collective bargaining, embedded in a flexicurity system: the combination of flexible conditions for companies (employees can be dismissed at short notice and redundancy payments are

low or do not exist—with exception of salaried employees) and social protection for the workforce provided by the welfare state, with strong unions negotiating conditions of employment. The model was praised for its high degree of employment security, serving employers and employees, and hence society as a whole, by promoting productivity and competitiveness of enterprises and total employment (Daguerre, 2007, p. 10). Unemployment benefits are financed through the unemployment insurance, covering around 80% of the work force. The daily rate in both unemployment insurance and social benefits has decreased by about 20% since the 1970s, while membership fees have grown (*ibid.*, 207). There are certain conditions tied to receiving payments (certain length of full-time work contributions, living up to existing demands of activity and availability, etc.). In the 1970s, the social democratic government ‘saw the state as an important and responsible actor in the functioning of society. Unemployment was viewed as the result of a capitalist market economy, and the individual worker could not be blamed for being hit by unemployment’ (*ibid.*).

Activation policies aimed at constructing the active jobseeker were introduced and now dominate the employment politics. In the 1980s, schemes were focusing on training and retraining the unemployed. This ‘activation paradigm’ was introduced in 1994 in Denmark and has expanded throughout the last three decades, resulting in rising demands of activity and availability as well as installing control and surveillance technologies coupled with economic sanctions if people fail to live up to the demands (Andersen, 2020; Bengtsson et al., 2015). A combination of coercion and financial incentives tries to change individual behaviour (Daguerre, 2007, p. 5) and people are responsible for being ready for the modern labour market. During the 1990s, a responsibility discourse emerged, zooming in on the unemployed as being responsible of their employability by participating in activation schemes, which since the 2000s have arguably become a tool of coercion (*ibid.*, 208). The shift from welfare to workfare state has been documented in many studies in various western countries (Caswell et al., 2010; Nielsen et al., 2020) and Denmark is no exception.

Theoretical Framework

We contextualise our analysis within recent critical theory accounts of work pathologies, before combining Honneth’s work on struggles for recognition with critical psychology’s work on the standpoint of the subject to discuss restricted vs. expansive agency as components of social conflict around the meaning of work that seek to counter work pathology, e.g. through accommodation at individual level or by challenging dominant conditions.

Work Pathologies

Drawing on Hegel, both Axel Honneth (2004) and Rahel Jaeggi (2017) describe work as a synonym for participation in societies’ universal resources, referring to what a society has achieved as the result of a joint effort, and what it is still able to achieve in terms of wealth and competences. In her historico-normative reconstruction of work, Jaeggi refers to work as ‘a normatively charged concept, one in which normative expectations and the current form of a society’s *relation* to work have become sedimented’ (2016, p. 70). She defines qualitative and meaningful work as work that helps people to self-identify, be identified and to ‘share in the evolving knowledge and know-how of a society’, which is increasingly difficult in a context of deteriorating employment conditions (2017, p. 62). Critical of a

diagnosis that blames capitalism *per se*, she endorses a critique of capitalism as a form of life that influences our relation to ourselves and to the world (2016, p. 60). One consequence is that participation in society's resources depends increasingly on work understood as employment.

In order to speak of pathology, two conditions must apply: individuals experience suffering as a result of their work or non-work; and the objective conditions of work and unemployment deny self-fulfilment (2017, p. 66), like precarious working conditions and structural long-term unemployment. Jaeggi refers to such structural pathological factors as 'deficits in a (labour-mediated) form of social cooperation' that exclude individuals from participation in above mentioned societal resources (*ibid.*, p. 60). It also renders questions of meaningful or dignified work as politically less relevant, as public policies and discourses increasingly focus on employability, alienating oneself from one's occupation, forcing people 'to recode economic necessity as personal freedom' (Weeks, 2017, p. 45). At the same time, 'the perceived success of our lives and our social relationships depends to a great extent not just on whether we have work, but also on what kind of work this is' (Jaeggi, 2017, p. 61). Work pathologies threaten society as a whole when the reduction of our identity-formation to employment has consequences for the equilibrium between societal spheres that constitute different aspects of ourselves. It threatens solidarity (*ibid.*, p. 64) and undermines social justice (Honneth, 2004, p. 352). The porousness of borders between societal spheres that used to separate family from waged labour have facilitated the colonization of the private sphere (Fraser, 2017), with the result that our work life and our private life are 'intrinsically linked' (Baréz-Brown, 2014, p. 10). Love and happiness have entered work life discourse in management classes, while love and care in the private sphere still do not count as 'proper' work, affecting communities and identities—and thus agency—at their core.

Honneth agrees that in the normative context of capitalism, it is through paid work that individuals realise who they are, their abilities, skills and talents, which in turn give them recognition and enable self-realization (Honneth, 1996). Already in the 1990s, he diagnosed a devaluing of certain kinds of work through structural changes in the labour market, like moving to services or away from lifelong tasks that create solidarity as collective accomplishments, which coincided with a turn away from normative underpinnings of the social-democratic welfare state (Honneth, 2004, p. 352). The work first paradigm in Danish labour policy illustrates such critique.

Struggles for Recognition

Honneth's theory of social justice starts with the individual and the understanding that a good life allows uncoerced identity formation for all members of society: 'It is the quality of social recognition conditions which should represent the core of a political ethics or societal morality' (Honneth, 2004, p. 356). He introduces love, rights and achievement as key components of fully realised identities, needed for the good life. Self-confidence is obtained in the sphere of love consisting of family and friends; self-respect is gained from universal rights in the sphere of rights and legal entitlements; and self-esteem is awarded through contributions to society's universal resources in the cultural and political sphere (Honneth, 1996). Recognition in each sphere influences individual or group agency and the ability to engage in recognition struggles for a good life. As Ikäheimo (2017) points out, recognition can happen on both a vertical and horizontal axis: The former refers to recognition between groups or individuals accepting authority upwards, while a higher institution

Components of identity	Recognition sphere	Self	Recognition relations
Love	Intimate sphere	Self-confidence	Horizontal, conditional or unconditional
Rights	Legal and political rights sphere	Self-respect	Vertical and horizontal, conditional or unconditional
Achievement	Sphere of social valuation	Self-esteem	Horizontal, conditional or unconditional

Fig. 1 Spheres of recognition based on Ikäheimo (2017)

such as the state recognises and guarantees the rights of citizens, who are the legitimating source of authority. The horizontal axis refers to intersubjective recognition between persons or groups (ibid., p. 569), the latter being the primary site of Honneth's work. Each consideration of inter-subjective recognition can be conditional (that is guided by self-interest) or unconditional, like love, respect, or gratitude for the other's care or interest as a motivation for recognition (ibid.).

Honneth points out that withholding recognition is legitimised by the understanding that people are falling short in their social contributions, and hence do not deserve our recognition. In this case unemployed people have themselves to blame and to hold responsible for their situation. The task of welfare reminds the subject that it is 'given the chance to participate in an elementary manner in the cooperative context of society by making his or her own contribution' (Honneth, 2004, p. 352). Honneth predicted a rise in recognition struggles, as subjects seek equal measures of social recognition that permit them successful identity formation and thus appearance in public without shame. As the boundaries between public and private life have become porous (Fraser, 2017), researchers and practitioners are demanding and implementing more integrated and democratic perspectives on work, respectful of abilities, self-determination, sustainability and reciprocity. This is expressed, e.g. in social and solidarity economy organizations, or in businesses that want to be socially and environmentally responsible (e.g. Andersen & Hulgård, 2019; Eschweiler & Hulgård, 2019), in a recent call by researchers worldwide to democratise work,¹ or in the work-less movements in Denmark and elsewhere (Billion, forthcoming²; Schor, 2010).

How to interpret recognition struggles? Honneth points out that the normative principles of each sphere of recognition are constantly subject of struggle for interpretation (Honneth, 2004, p. 361). We will use the experiences of young unemployed artists to explore the relevance of each recognition sphere and relations between them in individual agentic considerations. Critical psychology's work on restricted and expansive agency helps us interpret to what extent individuals seek to accommodate or challenge conditions and consequences of unemployment in each sphere, both on vertical and horizontal levels.

¹ Fraser, Neiman, Mouffe et al. (2020) Humans are not resources. Coronavirus shows why we must democratise work.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/15/humans-resources-coronavirus-democratise-work-health-lives-market> (accessed 14 August, 2020).

² Less work-bevægelsen breder sig: Arbejdet skal ikke styre livet, Magisterbladet, 12.2.2020. (accessed 14. August 2020).

Critical Psychology: The Standpoint of the Subject and Restricted and Expansive Agency

This analytical strategy is aided by critical psychology's work on the standpoint of the subject, as we find it fruitful to focus on the subject's everyday experiences and meaning making processes related to different spheres of recognition. With critical psychology, we explore self-perceptions of our interview participants. They are young, formally unemployed people in Denmark with creative aspirations. We explore how they engage in agency to promote more positive self-identification, conceptualised as recognition struggles in relation to the unemployment system. An integrated theory of human subjectivity, critical psychology sets out to capture the complexity and conflictual understanding of everyday living (Sieland, [forthcoming](#), p. 145; Schraube, [2013, 2015, 2016](#)). It underlines the dual possibilities of action, as individuals must constantly decide between 'expanding possibilities in order to reach longer-term pursuits or acting under given possibilities and restricting pursuits of longer-term interests' (Sieland, [forthcoming](#), p. 97).

In order to capture the dual possibilities of action in everyday life raised above, we work with the distinction between restricted and expansive agency. The first refers to perceived possibilities, limitations and motivations for action, as individuals have reasons to both challenge certain conditions in order to further their interests, or to accommodate and reproduce the given possibilities, e.g. if the risk of conflict with power might undermine long-term interests (Schraube, [2015](#), p. 541): 'The restrictive aspect refers to a *narrowing in* of engagements followed by created or extended suffering or conflict in our living' (Sieland, [forthcoming](#), p. 135). It also refers to being stuck or trapped and generally means that conflictual circumstances are upheld and not transgressed. Inspired by the concept of 'conflict' (Højholt & Kousholt, [2019](#)) and 'conflictual cooperation' (Axel, [2011](#)) we identify both the areas of contradictions and investigate how the unemployed people manage or perhaps even 'play' the system in ways that makes it more meaningful to them. We would expect to see restricted agency, e.g. in subjects simply trying to carve out a small space of agency for themselves within the system, despite the wish to go against the institutionalised order (Fraser, [2017](#)) and capitalism as a form of life (Jaeggi, [2016](#)).

Expansive agency refers to 'the human capacity to gain, in cooperation with others, control over each individual's own life conditions (Holzkamp, [2013](#), p. 20). Sieland writes ([forthcoming](#), p. 104): 'What makes it expansive is that the gained control over life conditions helps the person overcome circumstances that may impede the realization of his or her interests and goals in life. It is expansive because transformation or transgression of contradictory conditions implies an opening up of (new) possibilities of acting and engaging.' This distinction, typical in German critical psychology, is useful because it connects individual interests and experiences to a critique of capitalist society, allowing us to link individual experience conceptually to recognition struggles (Dejours et al., [2018](#), p. 94) and thus back to work pathologies in society. We would expect to see expansive agency, e.g. through challenging the dominant normative narrative (pathology through neoliberal unemployment system), which is conflictually experienced. Conceptually, dominant narratives are the result of historical social practice, which subjects feel the need to change as they long for recognition: that recognition of accomplishments, needed for self-esteem and the good life, depend on employment status.

In this paper, we investigate conflictual restrictive and expansive agency factors in each sphere of recognition, meaning we explore how people develop more mastery of their circumstances in the spheres of rights, achievement and love. We are curious how

our interview participants deal with the contradictions of action in everyday life and how they translate into struggles for recognition in society, including challenging the normative structures in relation to work. Honneth predicted an increase in recognition struggles, expressed in political forces questioning democratic values in the name of justice from the far right, but also in new and old initiatives that try to go new avenues to tackle rising consequences of work pathologies (Honneth, 1996). His work mainly focusses on intersubjectively based pathologies rather than the structural character of social systems. This neglect has been equally criticised by scholars (e.g. Fraser, 2017; Kavoulakos, 2019). We address both by reflecting on individual perceptions and struggles embedded in the concrete institutional context on the Danish unemployment system.

Method and Analytical Strategy

In order to explore recognition struggles in the three spheres of love, rights and achievement, we have analysed in-depth and semi-structured interviews with young, well-educated unemployed people. The interviews were conducted for a Ph.D. investigating how young unemployed people are governed and govern themselves within the Danish unemployment benefit system (Pultz, 2017). Interview participants were randomly recruited through a national unemployment fund for people with higher education. Lists of unemployed members were generated in a randomised order and SP contacted each participant over the phone. The interviews were mainly conducted at the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, in an office and lasted between 1 and 1.5 h. The sample consists of 48% females, ages ranging from 25 to 35 with an average age of 29 years. Forty percent of the interview participants have work experience, and 70% are either married or in a relationship. In comparison with other unemployed people in Denmark, this group is characterised as resourceful. The semi-structured interviews were conducted based on a protocol composed of questions eliciting information about their unemployment experience more broadly, including employment record, and their everyday life and social relations. The protocol also contained questions addressing how the unemployed people experienced the unemployment benefit system, including the demands of activity and availability inherent in the employment policies associated with the “activation paradigm” as well as how they were experienced being viewed in society. Overall, the nature of the empirical data is rich and complex, providing us with a good foundation for pursuing the current research aims.

In accordance with critical psychology (Dreier et al., 2016; Schraube, 2015; Holzkamp, 1983) our vantage point is based on data gathering from the standpoint of the subject and their conduct of their everyday life. In critical psychology, participants are often considered co-researchers (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019) and we have not been able to live up to this methodological ideal as we have used data originally produced for a different purpose within a broader critical social psychological approach (Pultz, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, we selected a subgroup (13 out of a total of 39) from the sample. We selected interviews for the purpose of this paper who met the following inclusion criteria: formally unemployed, described themselves as different to the ordinary unemployed people, and with aspirations in creative fields or engaged in meaningful activities that made them challenge the dominating understanding of work being equal to paid labour. The selected sample is thus a subgroup of the total sample which also includes, i.e. engineers who overall had a very different unemployment experience partly due to an unemployment rate close to 0%. The findings made here are representative for this subgroup, even though some

dilemmas might apply for others within the sample as well. In order to explore the research question at hand, namely how young unemployed people work within and against the system, we therefore revisited the entire empirical material, but analysed the 13 selected interviews.

All interviews were transcribed and coded using the software program Nvivo. The coding manual was developed based on reading through the material and identifying relevant themes and issues rising both from the theoretical approach as well as more empirical themes (see more authors own, 2017, Fig. 1). Based on accounts from the standpoint of the subject, we interpret the data based on the theoretical framework we have developed (Holzkamp, 1983), combining recognition (Honneth, 2004) with key concepts from critical psychology that focus on the contradictory and dual aspects of action always involving both restrictive and expansive elements (Holzkamp, 1983, Sieland, forthcoming) we have selected relevant codes that address issues related to recognition in the various spheres as well as matters of agency. In the analysis, we seek to identify dynamics that enable a sense of agency among the unemployed people. We first focus on how the unemployed people twist and twerk the rules or challenge the dominating work first ideology. This ideology entails an understanding that recognition is reduced to employment status. We go on to identify how they develop a sense of agency by taking part in communities of recognition that are based on alternative ideology emphasising the value of non-work domains. For the purpose of this article, we have operationalised Honneth's spheres in the following:

- Concerning the reciprocal sphere, we have used the data about employment record and how experienced being viewed in society.
- Concerning the legal sphere, we have used the data about their experience of receiving unemployment benefits; do they receive them with good conscience? Do they feel guilty or embarrassed about it?
- Concerning the private sphere, we have used the data regarding how their everyday life and important persons in their life. That is, such as data on whether they experienced an emotional toll of unemployment and whether they shared those worries with anyone close to them. We also use data about how and if unemployment affected their personal relations in any way

This approach helps us gain insights on perceptions about (a) recognition status; (b) restrictive agency considerations, particularly aspects determined by the level of recognition received (Honneth, 2004, p. 354) in different spheres of love, rights and achievement (horizontal and vertical recognition patterns) and the everyday conflictuality of feeling restricted by the unemployment system, while using it deliberately; and (c) expansive agency considerations in relation to what can be evaluated as work and how individuals wish to see the concept expanded, referring to a change of dominant normative narrative of work.

Analysis

The analysis begins by exploring struggles of recognition in relation to the sphere of rights. We have operationalised this sphere to include experiences being a citizen, including the experience of the local employment office and the unemployment fund as well as their experience having rights and duties in the Danish welfare state. We proceed by exploring

struggles of recognition in relation to the sphere of achievement. We understand this as the various activities that the individual takes part in in society. Last, we explore struggles of recognition in the sphere of love and this includes informal work communities and volunteer work.

Recognition and Agency Considerations in the Sphere of Rights-Vertical Relations and Self-respect

According to Honneth, we learn about acknowledgement in society by exploring cases of the opposite (Honneth, 2004). In the interviews, there are countless narratives about participants finding the employment system meaningless, incompetent or simply infantilizing:

You know, something completely ridiculous, where you think - hellooo; I am young, and I just graduated. Why do you already want to push me towards something different than what I am good at. It's all about trying to wipe off the shit, or pass it on or send it to someone else and get you activated as quickly as possible, and then hide it under the guise of it being oh so nice to this and that ... And in reality, it's just because they have to meet some requirements set by the government. So, it is not so much about what's at the individual's best, it is more about what the system is going to do to what it has now started. And it is insanely ridiculous.

In the quote, James feels reduced to an object in the system. He does not feel respected as a person; the system's logic is the main driver behind what decisions are made and he opposes to that. Despite the rejection, him and others still suffer because of this. However, to many newly unemployed, it is also an eye opener about the impact of policies on everyday life.

John: I think I have become much more politically conscious by being on unemployment benefit and I have never really been interested in it, even when I graduated. But then to suddenly see how the system works when being in the receiving role, it made me very aware of what policies do. And I haven't experienced that many other places before. It is very rare that politicians from Christiansborg have a direct effect on me.
interviewer: So, the state just entered into the living room?

John: Yes, exactly. It's funny, because there are a lot of people like me doing everything possible while on unemployment benefits, and it's a popular topic of conversation and you also develop a lot of experience and discuss the politics of it. One cannot help but talk about how why it is that we are treated this way. There is an awareness of politics.

In the above, John describes how politics is no longer an abstract matter but becomes embodied and makes him politically alert or aware. In part, this reflects that the sample is privileged in the sense that none of them have prior experience having direct contact with systems due to poverty, housing issues or social marginalisation. In order to explore struggles of recognition as well as restrictive and expansive agency, this reflexivity is crucial as it constitutes an important foundation for thinking critically about the specific administration of citizens' rights and duties. While the policies seem restrictive to him, he also describes that becoming aware also involves an expansive element taking part in dialogues and discussions. This highlights the social aspect of political awareness and expansive agency.

Struggles of Recognition and Agency Considerations in the Sphere of Achievement-Identity and Self-esteem

Receiving unemployment benefits in Denmark is conditional on living up to certain demands, among them being member of an unemployment fund and having paid monthly fees for a minimum of 12 months. Despite this element of insurance, the experience of *deservingness* is still up for discussion. Receiving money from the state comes with a particular price and installs a dilemma balancing between being entitled but also feeling bad about it (see also Pultz, 2019). The ambivalence experienced suggests feeling restricted but also feeling conflictual as the case of deservingness is not settled. In Mads' case, this ambivalence becomes very evident; he has savings, but below he shares his thoughts about whether he should use that money rather than receive unemployment benefit:

Mads: I am really not that crazy about it (receiving unemployment benefit, ed. authors), which is also why I have been considering the idea of opting out completely. Actually, perhaps I would want to do that. I think I will end up doing that too. I've just been money-savvy. Now I take a pour. It's not because I want to get unemployment benefits for all eternity. It's just a period. In fact, I also applied for many jobs, real jobs. My idea was that I was trying to get a driver job or a disability helper job. Many of my friends have something like that where they e.g. sit as watchmen a week a month and then they make a living. I would much rather do that! Being on a benefit is not very satisfying.

interviewer: Because what?

Mads: It's also not something you are proud of not being able to support yourself.

The normative ideal of supporting oneself financially means that he feels selfish and 'money-savvy' receiving money from the state. Being officially eligible does not seem to be enough in order to be deserving in a moral sense. Mads would prefer having a paid job that would allow him to work on his project in the music venue business. He finds himself in a dilemma; on the hand, he is able to pursue his creative dream on the basis of being within the system but on the other hand he feels bad about it and even fantasise about opting out. Receiving unemployment benefit includes an element of restrictive aspects of agency; as long as he finds himself in the system, he feels trapped and unable to succumb the problematic conditions identifying him as 'someone who is not able to support himself' underlining the restrictive aspects of agency.

Interestingly, the issue of deservingness also links up to the level of activity. Through activity one can be constituted as deserving. The activation paradigm introduced in the 1990s in Denmark has brought about an intimate link between activity and morals (Hansen, 2019). Since the 1990's, unemployed people have been represented as unmotivated or perhaps even lazy (Larsen, 2013). The rationality of conditionality in many ways seems to shape the experience of rights and duties. Receiving unemployment benefit is a right but it is conditioned by certain moral values such as a protestant work ethics. Søren says: 'As long as you are working really hard it is only fair to get unemployment benefits', and another interview participant, Christian, elaborates on the issue of deservingness:

No, no, I haven't had any doubts about it (*receiving unemployment benefit, ed. SP*), because I think I worked as much as I could. When you work so much, you don't sit down and do nothing. I would feel bad about it if I didn't do anything. Then I would feel really bad, then I would not be able to justify it. Then I would - 100 % - have

taken a job or something, because I would not be able to live as a human being, if I was just passively sitting and receiving. But since it is the case that I actually work so much, I take what I can get.

Unlike John who feels bad about receiving unemployment benefits, Christian feels entitled *if* he works really hard. He does express thinking actively about justifying his behaviour making visible the fact that receiving unemployment benefit is not just a practical or financial issue; it has an explicit moral dimension to it and that working hard is a condition for experiencing expansive agency. Christian argues based on a critique of the conditions for producing art in society and as a marginalised artist with few options for making a living so he ‘takes what he can get’ as he puts it. Understanding structural conditions adds to his experience of expansive agency.

As Michael below describes, the experience of unemployment is linked to an overall representation of unemployed people as useless or ‘second-class citizens’ and it makes him lose self-esteem even though he is a very resourceful young man:

Michael: I don’t think my friends care but there is a loss of social status for me. I used to work in the Ministry of Justice, and I got good grades, I was good at what I was doing, but now I am unemployed. It sounds so useless, it’s terrible. It’s terrible, and I think a lot of people are down because of that. I feel I have a good self-esteem, I am happy about my life and friends, but I understand that everybody is vulnerable. It’s terrible, you are told from everywhere that it is your own fault. You have to take courses, write better applications, you have to broaden your search, go out to small and medium-size companies, you have to be proactive, you can’t expect anything from anybody – you have to get a grip... (...). There has to be a punishment for the fact that I am not working and contributing to society, so they take my time. (...) I don’t think that is a punishment for me, but for you. It’s like in prison. We don’t do it to change the criminals but so we can all say: I don’t want to go to prison.’

Michael largely describes the work first paradigm put in place to make people want to work people should be afraid to become unemployed, otherwise too many would choose unemployment. He explains how he feels being drawn in from so many angles; all pushing him to become responsible as an active job seeker; that should not want to stay unemployed. Michael explicitly refers to a loss of social status and he expresses that not being recognised as a useful citizen in society, hurts his self-esteem. He is obviously critical in relation to this way of governing and representing unemployed people and he very vividly describes the restrictive aspects of agency associated with being unemployed. A reason to engage into struggles for recognition is the perceived lack of being met as a human being. He does not directly point to any aspects of expansive agency; however, we speculate that his reflexive and critical awareness towards the system might help him feel less trapped.

Unemployed by Choice

However paradoxical, the fact that the system is so poorly customised to them seems to legitimise using it for a different purpose than it is designed for, namely as a financial resource for their creative work, thus adding to an expansion of agency.

Henri points out how the unemployment system in many ways is shaped to meet the demands and discipline of traditional employees—people who for some reason have become unemployed and who are looking to secure another fulltime job. He does not

belong to this group. He has actively chosen to receive unemployment benefits in order to pursue a career as an entrepreneur with the cultural field. He literally says, 'I think of it (*being on unemployment benefits*, ed. authors) as entrepreneurial support'. A key element of the rationale of interview participants unemployed by choice is that unemployment benefits are broader than strictly compensation for being temporarily out of the labour market. This relates to what one feels entitled and able to do.

Peter says: 'It's hard to say no to money you are entitled to', underlining an experience of expansive agency, even though there are restrictive elements that they have to obey (such as looking for a job). The common feature of the young people who are 'unemployed by choice' (Pultz & Mørch, 2015) is that they have chosen to receive unemployment benefit in order to pursue careers in creative fields in which they are not able to support themselves financially. While they are unemployment benefit recipients formally, they do not by any means view themselves as belonging to this category. They want to create jobs, experiences, music and art that has not yet seen the light of the world. In that sense, they challenge a neoliberal ideology by which human worth is tied to work status as implemented in the work first strategy but on the other hand they enact a neoliberal value set of being entrepreneurial and innovative:

I have never felt like an unemployed because I have always had long pages of to-do lists, that just keep on growing and growing. (...) I do as much as I can and then hopefully it will pay off in the long run. That's also the reason I can't identify with being unemployed as if I am missing something in order to create. That's also why I consider it entrepreneurial support. But again, of course that is just something I tell myself. According to the rules, I am unemployed, obviously.

This group does indeed succeed in meeting the contrasting demands on a systemic level, but they do so by acting illegally. In that sense, the conditions are set in a way so that they can only be met by transcending them (author, 2019). The participants oppose the positioning of the unemployed as passive objects that can be controlled according to political initiatives. Michael says in an ironic voice imitating the state: 'If we push them in certain directions, then they will go over there. But people are not like that! If they are presented with certain incentives, they will react to them in way that it is most meaningful to them.' The discourse thus has a disciplining effect on the working population—the more the unemployed are looked down upon, the less appealing being unemployed presumably is.

Expanding Agency Through Restrictive Agency-Conflictual Recognition Struggles

In addition to voicing critique of the system based on experiences of meaninglessness, many of them describe working within and against the system by not obeying the official rules. This includes fabricating list of applications that they have not applied for, working informally or voluntary outside of what is permitted etc. Sophie who had been unemployed for a couple of months says: 'I have written down jobs that I didn't apply for in order to fill out that goddamn list. In a way, I keep a creative book.' Henrik who has been unemployed for 6 months tunes in: 'In total, I may have searched for 8 jobs.' He tells the unemployment fund: 'A lot more'. In addition to not living up to the official demands of availability, some of them also disclose that they earn money off the books while receiving unemployment benefit. Sara, who is a musician, elaborates: 'Now I receive unemployment benefits, but

there have been a few gigs that I have received money for while I have been on unemployment benefits. I'm not terribly proud of that either. But that has been the way it has been possible.'

The group who is unemployed by choice spend more time on their creative activities than on active job search, and while this is officially illegal, the practice is partially enabled or supported by social workers in the system to help them to navigate in a way so they avoid penalties or other sanctions. Mads describes getting guidance on what to report and what to keep away from official records: 'They have guided me, even though what I am doing is right on the edge. It's a lot about who you get to talk to. They talk about where the limit is for what I must and must not do.' Exploring struggles of recognition, this practice to some extent involves recognizing Mads as a legitimate citizen. James has a similar experience:

Yes, I have been in some situations where I have not gotten into things properly and then I fill things out a bit naively. I'll just do it like this. Then someone from the unemployment fund said - are you sure that's right what you have written there, and do you know the rules now? So, they push you to that place where you write what you need to get the unemployment benefits.

While the unemployed by choice are not fully recognised in the unemployment system, they are not fully invisible either, as the analysis shows that social workers know of their existence and to some extent also facilitate their practice by guiding them how to bend the rules, suggesting that it is maybe less bad to be an artist and unemployed. Case workers thus participate in a conflictual collaboration (Axel, 2011) paving the way for the practice. Analysing the practice with the concepts restrictive and expansive agency, the duality of action becomes a pressing issue to take into account. On the one hand, social workers enable expansive agency for this group of people who are unemployed by choice as it becomes possible to live life in a way that comes closer to living the lives they wish for (not taking on any paid, but spending time producing art or culture). On the other hand, the unemployed by choice are still navigating within a system that does not formally approve of their conduct, nor their unpaid creative output. This leaves little room for changing the conditions for recognition as the goal of expansive agency (Holzkamp, 1983).

Expanding the Meaning of Work

Inherent to the recognition struggles in the sphere of achievement is the discussion about what constitutes work. Julia reflects on how she can justify use unemployment benefits to support her as a creative individual that contributes to society by producing art. Ultimately, she challenges the understanding that work can only be understood as paid labour:

I think it's the right way to do it in the situation I'm in now. It becomes politics. I don't think there's anything wrong with the state supporting creative activities that wouldn't otherwise be able to exist without it (*being supported*, ed. authors). There is just this labour market logic; people just have to get a job or become an employee. And that's very much how we look at work. You work if you have a job. It is not the only way you can work. I think that will change.

Social media plays an important role in establishing an infrastructure for this alternative recognition outside of employment status. Michael uses Facebook to evaluate whether his activities only give him something personally or whether it resonates with a wider audience

that extends beyond his own friends and acquaintances. If his status update is shared by people he has no relationship with, he interprets it as an expression of his having inspired people or ‘hit a nerve’. Among these creative young people, neither money nor employment status is used to assess whether or not they are successful. The quote below from Henrik explains what it means to him to contribute to society with his unique voice and perspectives. If more than 200 shares his posts on social media, he feels being recognised as a valuable voice:

Henrik: At least it’s very cool to see that you don’t just yell out in the void.

Interviewer: Yeah, what does that give you?

Henrik: Then I know I’m creating something. If people actually bother to spend their time reading it, then I have created something that is not just myself. It’s often that I just write something because something has annoyed me, and then I don’t think much about who the recipients are. So, you have written something that comes from something personal, but if people like it, it is because it speaks to something in them. It’s not just a private feeling you get rid of. Good art just makes things look a little different. At least that’s where I feel I’m contributing.

Contributing to society by voicing a critical perspective that resonates with a wider audience provides a feedback to Henrik. He is not just doing it for himself—he is contributing to society even though it is not explicitly valued in monetary currency as are paid jobs.

The interview participants converge in portraying the dominating rationality in the system as informed by a market logic: ‘There is this liberal work logic that people just have to have jobs. You work if you have a job. That is not the only way you can work’ (Michael, 31). They challenge this understanding in two ways. First of all, they disagree that it is in principle always better to have any job than no job. Secondly, they view contributing to society in a broader perspective than what is dictated in a capitalist framework: ‘There is this idea that it is better to have a shitty job than no job. It may be that I am not contributing financially, but at least I am contributing with something to the social that would not just have arisen by itself’. Challenging the idea of work plays a key role as a foundation for the experience of expansive agency—they feel that they should be acknowledged for their contributions as work should include other activities than paid labour. Their argumentation echoes already existing debates about material vs. immaterial labour, affective labour (Hardt & Negri, 2001) and paid labour vs. work (Standing, 2011).

Recognition and Agency Considerations in the Sphere of Love-Driver of Self-confidence

A majority of the interview participants describe that family support, support from friends or partners is key to them. Elisabeth explains how the emotional toll of unemployment affects her marriage: “I am definitely more up-and-down, in a yo-yo mood, and I take that out on my husband, or not take out, but it affects our relationship ... [being unemployed] puts a pressure on it. All the worries I have about being unemployed and the future, he has to listen to that.” According to Honneth, being recognised is a fundamental human need and in order for their practice to be viable they have to establish communities in which they receive and provide one another with recognition. In creative communities, it is far from unusual to receive unemployment benefit at times; Sandra says: ‘Yes, more common than

not being (*on unemployment benefits among artists, ed. authors*). I wouldn't use percentages, but I think it's 90/10 more than 50/50.' The fact that the social practice is relatively widespread matters to them and bestows a sense of solidarity among creative peers.

Participants also describe feeling recognised through their activities and the effects they have on others as well as local communities:

We went to this city where we had to make sculpture. That requires talking to local people. All of a sudden, all the locals you are in dialogue with start to feel connected to the project you are working on. Then they all start talking about with each other, and then the press - the local newspaper- starts showing interest. Everyone gets bitten by it, so it no longer the object itself, but the process. That is what I love the most - the whole process.

The creation of the sculpture is not described by Henrik as a lonesome and isolated artistic practice but rather an engaging social and common experience. This experience of doing something valuable and meaningful also suggests an element of expansive agency supporting them in their practice.

Concluding Discussion

We set out to investigate how young unemployed people simultaneously work within and against the system. In doing so, we have contributed by combining critical theory with critical psychology which allow us to untangle issues of agency. The young unemployed people in our sample challenge the dominating work first paradigm, but they do so in a way in which they reproduce the existing system rather than transcend or transform it (see also Pultz, 2020). Before discussing the findings and their implications more thoroughly, we want to point out a limitation: the study is limited to a particular segment; that is well-educated and hence resourceful young people who have professional ambitions within a creative field and who might be better equipped at "playing" the system. They might also elicit more preferential treatment by case workers. This implicates that we might overestimate the role of expansive agency if we generalise findings beyond this particular segment. Future research should explore this matter.

In the interviews with young unemployed creative people, we find several common issues of recognition and how they affect their agency. We identify negative impacts of unemployment on self-perception, conflictual engagement with their situation and an emerging urge to change the normative understanding of what it means to work. Our analysis shows the conflictual circumstances when it comes to individual agency. Interview participants clearly formulate critique of the system, but some also consciously take social assistance to support their creative work, thus accommodating the negative consequences of unemployment in the spheres of rights and achievement (restrictive agency). On the other hand, it shows how collective conflictuality helps (expansive) agency to enfold—a collective understanding on what deserves merit within their own communities and networks, and aided in their 'playing' of the system by representatives of the unemployment system. This shared experience helps us to abstract from individual-level experience towards social critique through the concepts of recognition as the good life and agency as conflictual collaboration to achieve that goal. We will elaborate on each aspect, and also demonstrate how they are interrelated.

Responses in the sphere of rights partly confirm the notion of work pathologies, as interview participants do share a notion of the unemployment system making them citizens with limitations (Peter). They feel reduced to their employment status and a lack of entitlement (Mads, James, Michael, Sophie). Individual ways of dealing with this are conflictual in the sense that awareness of their situations becomes a resource for expansive agency: getting involved in political discussions (John) is an important first step. Holzkamp (1983, p. 401) uses the term *begreifen* to denote when the understanding of problems is not limited to the immediate appearance but instead are viewed in a societal and historical context based on specific conditions as well as contradictions. In order to change problematic conditions, it is necessary to understand what and how they can be transformed. As Holzkamp notes: 'It is an epistemic movement away from individualizing and psychologizing problems to seeing them as problems linked to wider circumstances. Or, to expand from a *one-sided* to a *many-sided* understanding of a conflict' (1983: 401). The support some of the participants have received by actors working within the unemployment system might add to their questioning the logic in the system, as well as make them feel themselves recognised in their identity as artists for whom precarious income seems to be part of life accepted (see also Umney & Kretsos, 2015). At the same time, the young people have to deal with restrictive factors such as a feeling of guilt and either engaging in meaningless activities from their perspective or lying about them to the social worker. Even the interview participant who feels entitled to unemployment benefits regarding it as entrepreneurial support only does so because he otherwise fulfils the normative expectations of society in relation to work—working hard, in other ways than contractual.

In the sphere of achievement, we see that agency is conflictual, both restrictive and expansive. Interview participants feel a decline in recognition and related lack of self-esteem, even if the way the unemployment system works is perceived as meaningless or old-fashioned. At the same time, some participants regard it as a source of entrepreneurial support, allowing them to take time out to produce art—which bestows them with recognition by those who admire or consume their work—and work on new ideas that they hope will be regarded as achievements later—but do not necessarily lead them to a work life they want. Still, most important here are reflections on what actually counts as work, e.g. that work is more than paid labour and that art in itself should be equally recognised as work. As a reminder of Honneth's work (2004), identity formation is embedded in social forms of interaction, governed by formal rights and duties (Honneth, 2004) and informal cultural codes that bestow conditional and unconditional recognition, based on underlying norms that govern social systems, developed over time and rooted in context. Though still not challenging the normative relation of society to work per se, interview participants nevertheless question the codes that link a certain notion of work to society's recognition (James). Such reflections happen at individual level, but they are part of a broader trend in Western European societies that questions a paradigm of work in which the well-being and recognition of individuals is at stake.

Interestingly, in the case of our interview participants, most of them experience support and recognition that allow them to keep their self-confidence in their social networks of friends and professional communities (Henrik), referred to as horizontal recognition. It confirms that family and community are more than the sphere of reproduction of employability (Jaeggi, 2016). In the case of our interview participants, this might be related to their educational backgrounds and age, but we see the sphere of love rather as a source of expansive agency, one that endows interview participants with resources to deal with conflictual experiences in the other two sites of recognition struggles.

Overall, we see a dilemma at individual level and some hopeful signs at societal level. Other research on young artists suggests that it is not untypical for reality to hit that the lure of autonomy and freedom' leads to an underestimation of the risks of career choice: low levels of success, underemployment and precarious economies (Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Pultz & Mørch, 2015). According to Lingo & Tepper, unemployment is the worst-case shattering hopes and expectations, as young artists experience the withdrawal of recognition in society and the consequences of unemployment in the sphere of rights: suddenly, the state gets to interfere with their lives. In this study, we find that our sample of young creative unemployed finds ways to deal with their situation, hoping it is temporary, sharing the experience with peers, and using the time to work creatively. They thus, albeit grudgingly, accept the authority of the state and its regulations, as it also opens personal interest opportunities. They also find ways of bending the system, partly aided by case workers who help them use the full scope of the unemployment system, partly through doing informal work, generating illegal earnings. This suggests that they are recognised as young people with potentials, whose unemployment is assumed to be temporary due to the 'project-based' nature of their chosen profession (Umney & Kretsos, 2015).

The dilemma resides in their conflictual experience of unemployment. Despite the negative impact of unemployment on self-perception, the recognition of their artist identities by peers and to some extent by the social workers who support them might prevent them from engaging in more long-term conflictual collaborative action against the unemployment system, even though at the time of unemployment, quite a few would have liked to see it changed. At the time of the interviews none of them had taken that step. Instead of challenging the power the system has over them, they remained in a situation of restricted agency, as the system affected them in both negative and supportive ways, keeping the recognition struggle at individual level. Nevertheless, both the experience of recognition withdrawal through unemployment and of horizontal patterns of recognition by peers help them articulate the struggle for recognition of creative work as value in society, questioning of the normative ideal of work in Danish society. They advocate how producing culture and art should be more recognised in society by resisting the notion of work as paid employment, as the only site that showcases creativity and talent (Honneth, 1996). Identifying alternative practice and externalizing it harbours the potential to take the struggle from the private to the sphere of rights and achievement.

This is not only significant in relation to pathological consequences of the unemployment system on self-identification and self-worth, but also in relation to the precarious standard of living of artists and other project-based workers, their number suddenly in the public eye during the Covid-19 pandemic. They have to combine different sources of income, do not fulfil standard expectations of efficiency and are currently forced into the unemployment system, bereaved of the opportunity to show their talent and creativity for the foreseeable future. They are struggling to find new spaces of performance and sharing, living off a very fragile solidarity of society with culture, freelancers and people in precarious work arrangements. As it is, we find the analysis of work pathology confirmed in the logic of the Danish unemployment system. Combining critical theory and critical psychology has been fruitful. Taking the standpoint of the subject to understand individual perception of being in the unemployment system opens a window on the complex restrictive and expansive conflictualities that work pathology generates in different spheres of recognition, restricting individual agency to challenge dominant normative understanding of work in liberal society.

Maybe Jaeggi's analysis of capitalism as a form of life (2016) shows us a lack of trust in society, eroded by a narrative that pushes for traditional employment and the expectation to demonstrate our own (trust) worthiness. This is bad news for social justice, since it

demands the right social recognition conditions. However, as critical theory has the aim of emancipation, our approach also leads to the conclusion that we must expand the concept of work. It underlines the importance of the co-creation of policies between public sector and citizens experimenting with alternatives, hand in hand with voices questioning the current system in public discourses. 'In the view of its members, societies represent legitimate order structures only to the degree that they are in a position to guarantee reliable relations of mutual recognition at various levels. To this extent, the normative integration of societies takes place only by way of institutionalizing principles of recognition that regulate in a comprehensible way the forms of mutual recognition through which its members become involved in the societal context of life' (Honneth, 2004: 354).

In conclusion, we set out to explore how young unemployed simultaneously work within and against the unemployment system in ways that reproduces but also challenges the dominant work first paradigm. Based on a diagnostic of current work pathologies, we have deployed the critical psychological concepts restricted and expansive agency to capture how the young unemployed people challenge the dominant work first paradigm. They challenge the idea that only paid labour counts as work and they seek recognition based on their creative contributions to society.

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