

Negative emotional consequences of labour market activation policies for long-term unemployed young adults in Finland

Negative
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of ALMPs

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Abstract

Purpose – This article deals with the negative emotional consequences of active labour market policies (ALMPs) for long-term unemployed young adults in Finland. Although such policies may have positive effects, an exploration of their negative impacts reveals their problematic side effects. We explore various aspects of ALMP interventions that prevent individuals from gaining such positive outcomes and thus reduce their motivation to invest in the policies.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on the affect theory of social exchange, we understand that individuals seek positive rewards from social interactions. Our data is taken from life course interviews with unemployed people aged 20–31 in central Finland in 2012–2013.

Findings – We find three factors linked to ALMPs that diminish participants' emotional well-being: experiences of unfairness, lack of control and a mismatch between ALMPs and clients' needs. By paying attention to aspects of labour market policy that diminish emotional well-being, it is possible to build more functional policies that better meet the needs of long-term unemployed individuals.

Originality/value – This study fills a significant gap in the literature, because there is limited research on unintended negative outcomes of ALMP activation.

Keywords Emotions, Unemployment, Youth, Affect theory of social exchange, Active labour market policies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Wider trends such as globalisation, the growing significance of markets, increasing competition, privatisation and deregulation of labour markets have created individualisation, de-standardisation and fragmentation for young peoples' transition and working careers (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2005; Walther, 2006). For the welfare states, these labour market trends have meant a shift towards workfare and activation policies, i.e. passive benefits towards more active measures. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) have become the main labour market scheme in OECD countries (Kluve, 2010). The long-term unemployed (Fraser, 1999) and the young have been important target groups (Karjalainen, 2013; Dietrich, 2012), because high and persistent youth unemployment has raised concerns about youth labour market integration (Caliendo and Schmidt, 2016).

Activation has changed unemployed jobseekers' societal position, with stricter conditions and increased links between the obligation to work and unemployment benefits. It has also changed the political focus from Keynesian demand-side policies towards supply-side policies and the individualisation of unemployment (Keskitalo, 2008; Raffass, 2017). Due to



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its' "intensified coercion" against vulnerable groups and individualisation, activation policies have evoked heavy criticism (Raffass, 2017, p. 349; Eversberg, 2016; Carter and Witworth, 2017; Wright and Patrick, 2019). As activation policies tend to increase labour supply, "while employers obligations toward labour are minimised at the same time" (Raffass, 2017, p. 357), this increases pressure on unemployed individuals. Critics have noted the specific relations between activation policies and neoliberalism (e.g. Whitworth, 2016; Haikkola, 2019). In neoliberal ideology, an emphasis on individual autonomy displaces responsibility for young adults' difficulties from wider societal structures onto young peoples' own behaviour, glossing over the structural features of unemployment (e.g. Walther, 2006; Wright, 2016).

Some studies have found that ALMP participation has been associated with experiences of failure and exclusion among unemployed individuals (Parkkila-Puranen, 2015; Sandelin, 2014). There is evidence that neoliberal workfare ALMP interventions can increase participants' anxiety, decrease their life satisfaction and foster their feelings that life is not worthwhile (Carter and Witworth, 2017). There are occasionally also problems with the quality of ALMP interventions, which can be stigmatising and offer too few opportunities for social interaction (Sage, 2013, 2015b). In addition, sanctions tend to aggravate problems among the most disadvantaged participants (Caliendo and Schmidl, 2016). However, the reasons behind these adverse outcomes remain unclear (see also Raffass, 2017). The wide use of ALMP measures to fight youth unemployment contrasts starkly with our low level of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of such measures (Caliendo and Schmidl, 2016). It has been repeatedly shown that youth-targeted ALMP interventions result in weaker employment outcomes than general ALMP interventions; their impact on young people's probability of employment can be even negative (Card *et al.*, 2017; Kluve, 2010). This raises serious questions about what happens to youth during and after ALMP interventions. There may be a risk that ALMP interventions can further marginalise already vulnerable individuals such as long-term unemployed youth.

We are well aware of the positive potential of ALMP measures; indeed, in our data, positive outcomes of ALMP interventions are quite common: ALMP interventions have fostered their workability and mental health, enhanced their employment prospects and supported their well-being through providing meaningful activities and new social contacts (Ylistö, 2021). Two Finnish qualitative literature reviews have concluded that ALMP interventions can positively impact participants coping skills, quality of life, faith of future, financial situation, self-esteem, workability, overall activity, circadian rhythm and offer social contacts and meaningful activities (Sandelin, 2014; Parkkila-Puranen, 2015). In general, ALMP interventions can help to alleviate these adverse outcomes by fostering unemployed participants' subjective well-being, physical health and social capital (Sage, 2013, 2015a, b). Given the large and significant well-being costs associated with unemployment, ALMP interventions' positive well-being-related outcomes may be an important finding from a social policy perspective (Sage, 2015b).

However, there is still a lack of understanding of how adverse outcomes can result from services whose purpose is to help individuals gain employment and cause unintended, unfavourable emotional consequences on unemployed young people. Qualitative research remains under-represented in the literature on activation and ALMPs. Our study contributes to qualitative approaches to unemployment research (see Patrick, 2014; Wright, 2016; Wright and Patrick, 2019) and investigates the often neglected and under-investigated negative consequences of activation policies. We study the emotions of young participants in ALMP measures based on the understanding of the policies as transactions and exchange relations. In particular, we aim to identify negative emotional experiences of young people emerging from the daily context of ALMP participation. By negative emotional experiences, we mean how certain emotions such as anxiety, frustration, the experience of injustice and the lack of

control, arise from repeated patterns of failed exchanges in the context of ALMP interventions.

Such research is crucial for the development of better ALMP interventions for unemployed youth. ALMP interventions' effect on young people's emotional well-being is an especially important research topic because mental health issues are probably the most common problem concerning youth activation. Approximately 20–25% of Finnish youth have mental health problems (Marttunen *et al.*, 2013); mental illness is also the leading reason why young adults receive disability benefits (see Koskenvuo *et al.*, 2014). We refer to the affect theory of social exchange (Lawler, 2001; Molm, 1997), which considers the rewarding and punishing aspects of exchange relations and transactions in terms of emotional outcomes. This theory offers insights into how the daily routines of ALMP interventions can lead to negative emotions and even long-lasting emotional damage.

Our data consists of 28 semi-structured life course interviews conducted in 2012–2013 with long-term unemployed young adults aged 20–31 from the Jyväskylä region in Finland. We use content analysis to address the problematic emotional consequences of youth activation policies. We summarise the central problems into three categories: experiences of unfairness, lack of control and mismatch between activation measures and clients' needs.

Finnish activation policy

Finnish youth unemployment rate is relatively high compared to Sweden or Norway and OECD countries on average. Finnish youth unemployment rate can be explained partly by the large proportion of students searching for part-time work. That is why the Finnish youth unemployment spell duration is one of the lowest in the OECD countries. The number of NEETS is somewhat lower than the OECD average but significantly higher than, for example, in Sweden and Norway. Finnish youth labour market performance is slightly above OECD averages but weaker than in other Nordic countries (OECD, 2019, pp. 19–37).

There have been numerous activation reforms targeted at youth in OECD countries, including Finland that represents an universalistic and socio-democratic welfare regime model (Walther, 2006; Blossfeld *et al.*, 2005). Finnish labour market policies combine workfare policies and the human capital development approach. Neoliberal workfare policies focus on supply-side factors that lead individuals to actively offer, contribute and adjust themselves to employers' needs (McDonald and Marston, 2005; Serrano Pascual, 2007). The human capital development approach seeks broader welfare goals rather than a rapid move into employment. It seeks to improve welfare recipients' long-term employability through various measures including training, education, counselling and social and health services (Keskitalo, 2008, pp. 106–107). One of the main targets of workfare elements in Finnish social policy has been young people without formal post-compulsory education (Haikkola, 2019). Under-25-year-olds were the first specific target group of Finnish labour market policies (Haikkola, 2020).

Finland has been quite active in youth activation policies since the 1990s. In 1996 labour market subsidy was made conditional for all under-20 year-olds who lacked vocational degrees; a year later this was extended to the under-25s. In 2011 this obligation was broadened to individuals who have interrupted their studies without public employment service (PES) acceptance. These reforms included a five-month wait from the start of unemployment, the obligation to apply to study every year and the obligation to participate in ALMP measures. Also, the rehabilitative work experience act in 2001 targeted originally the under 25-year-old unemployed youth. Rehabilitative work experience is a special work training scheme for the long-term unemployed people who have problems with employability. Rehabilitative work experience later broadened to older age groups. In 2005 the first youth guarantee introduced individualised job search plans for the unemployed

youth, which had to include offers of a job, education or ALMP measures. The implementation of the job search plans was also monitored during the regular meetings. The second youth guarantee reform was made in 2013, which included a youth education guarantee. Youth guarantee started the development of Ohjaamo multi-professional one-stop guidance centres for under 30-years old youths. Youth guarantee also started a young adult's skill program (NAO-program), which purpose was to guarantee vocational qualifications to the youth. One of the most significant target groups of these youth activation policies has been school dropouts.

There also have been numerous activation reforms in Finland since the early 1990s, which have targeted the unemployed population in general. These regulations affect youth also, and it has meant tightening monitoring and requirements of participation in education, work or ALMP measures. Failure to fulfil these requirements can lead to sanctions, revealing neoliberalism's strong influence on Finland's employment policies.

Affect theory of social exchange

Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) sees that "much of what we need and value in life (e.g. goods, services, companionship, approval, status, information) can only be obtained from others" (Molm, 1997, p. 12). Social exchange is understood as a relational process where an exchange network is "a set of "connected" exchange relations" entailing repeated transactions by actors (Lawler and Yoon, 1998, p. 872). The affect theory of social exchange (Molm, 1997; Lawler, 2001) is generally interested in scrutinising what types of emotions emerge from transactions and how they influence the formation of stronger or weaker ties to social units and objects such as relations, groups, networks, communities or society (Lawler, 2001; Lawler *et al.*, 2006). The main idea in the affect theory of social exchange is to explore "how actors experience, interpret, and respond to their own emotions and feelings produced by successful or unsuccessful exchange efforts" (Lawler, 2001, p. 323).

Emotions are understood as internal events that occur within an actor and derive from external conditions and events (Lawler *et al.*, 2006). They "are a subtle signal to actors about their own responses in interaction" (Lawler, 2001, p. 323). Individuals seek rewarding and positive emotional experiences from their transactions. Exchange outcomes may be rewarding or punishing, and their emotional effects vary in form and intensity (Lawler, 2001; Molm, 1990). All types of transactions – i.e. individuals transacting with institutions, within organisations and with various forms of policy in their daily lives – generate emotional consequences.

The affect theory of social exchange scrutinises the social conditions under which social exchange produces positive or negative emotional consequences. The negative and positive emotions that actors experience are likely to have an effect on their future transactions by either decreasing or increasing their motivation to participate in future exchanges (Lawler, 2001; Lawler *et al.*, 2006). The theory generally acknowledges that significant power imbalances in exchange relations create negative emotional reactions such as shame or anger among those in the disadvantaged position (Molm, 1990). In addition, when their needs and valuations are endangered or not easily met, people generally experience emotional distress.

Various forms of transaction are related to actors' experience of justice and fair treatment. In circumstances "in which benefits are exchanged or distributed, questions of justice arise" – meaning that individuals care deeply about the norms of reciprocity and fair exchange, and about feelings of unfair treatment. Such feelings make them less motivated to invest in and commit to such relations in future (Molm *et al.*, 2003, p. 128). Commitment is related to the positive emotional consequences that the exchange relation generates; it is understood as "the attachment an individual feels to a collective entity" (Lawler and Yoon, 1996, p. 90).

We understand ALMP measures as transactions and exchange relations between organising actors and long-term unemployed young people. Unemployed young adults are expected to participate in various activities and actively seek employment in exchange for benefits. An exchange theory would see these transactions and interactions as “a process of giving and receiving” in which unemployed individuals fulfil the expectations of PES in order to receive valuable resources while simultaneously seeking “profit” from those exchange relations (Turner and Stets, 2005, p. 179). ALMP measures form a context where this daily exchange takes place. Social exchange theories are able to scrutinise the aspects of these measures that long-term unemployed young adults experience as problematic, and draw attention to the emotional dynamics of daily exchanges that can affect young people.

Data and method

Our data consists of 28 semi-structured life course interviews, 17 men and 11 women, conducted in 2012–2013 with long-term unemployed young adults aged 20–31 in the Jyväskylä region in central Finland, which then had a high general unemployment rate. We define long-term unemployment according to the broader definition of unemployment: participation in labour market measures does not end unemployment (Montén and Tuomala, 2003). An individual is long-term unemployed if they have been continuously without work for at least 12 months. Our interviewees were contacted through rehabilitative and training organisations and by snowball sampling through the social networks of the unemployed themselves. Interviewed youth’s life situation varied at the moment of the interviews: 15 were in ALMP measures, ten were unemployed, two studied and one was on a disability pension. The interviewed youth were not exceptionally dissatisfied service users because they also gave positive feedback of ALMP interventions.

Data is relevant as it is based on life course interviews of a vulnerable group that is difficult to reach. There have not been many significant labour market policy reforms after the data gathering except labour service organisational reform; the second youth guarantee reform in 2013; establishment of youth one-stop guidance centres due to youth guarantee 2014; and unemployed periodic interviews since 2017. These reforms have brought only minor changes in ALMP interventions. There have not been significant changes in Finnish labour markets, the national economy or the Finnish youth’s societal position between data gathering and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In our data, positive experiences related to active labour policies were common. This indicates that activation measures to some extent can mimic paid work and produce similar positive psychosocial outcomes (Sage, 2015b) by offering similar latent functions to real employment or work in general (Jahoda, 1979). But in addition to these positive experiences, we also found worrying indications of adverse emotional consequences emerging from various situations during and after activation measures. Such adverse outcomes are usually hard to study, because dissatisfied service users tend not to participate in any research. Such young people may also simply disappear from the whole service system if the intervention fails (Karjalainen and Karjalainen, 2010). Hence, collecting data or even feedback from these young service users is complicated.

Our data meets these challenges because it comes from a group of young adults that often “disappear” in surveys (Siisiäinen, 2014; Karjalainen and Karjalainen, 2010). Our interviewees faced vulnerable life situations and had special needs for psychosocial support. The majority suffered from depression or other mental health problems such as anxiety or panic attacks, and approximately a quarter had problems with substance abuse. The overall majority (though not all) had been socialised into low levels of economic, cultural and social resources from an early age. Nearly all of them lacked social networks (e.g. through parental divorce,

bereavement or peer rejection) in their daily lives, which indicated that they received little help from significant others or their near environment.

During interviews, participants were asked about their experiences with regard to education, work and participation in labour market measures; they were also asked about their emotional well-being and (mental) health. In light of Finland's youth ALMP policies, we particularly investigated four activation measures supervised by PES: (1) training and supported employment interventions, including subsidised work; (2) the obligation to apply for study; (3) PES courses and employment training; (4) regular meetings with PES (Haikkola, 2019). We focused on how these four types of activation caused emotional stress or harm for long-term unemployed youth. Our study is important because Finnish youth ALMP measures have strongly targeted school dropouts (Haikkola, 2019, 2020), who are also a vulnerable group in respect to mental health (Parviainen *et al.*, 2020), meaning that they are especially vulnerable to the negative emotional outcomes of unsatisfactory social exchange relations.

The interview data was subjected to inductive content analysis, in which concepts are derived from data (Cavanagh, 1997; Elo and Kyngäs, 2007). First, we screened the data systematically, which enabled us to select all the extracts including negative emotions in relation to ALMPs. We found 106 extracts of between one and ten sentences in length. Then we coded the data, and created categories and abstractions. We coded the extracts by summarising the central idea in a few words. For example, the extract "I was so distressed about those job offers" was summarised as "distress because of job offer". Then we categorised the codes hierarchically and labelled the categories with theoretically relevant concepts. We formed 27 subcategories that described situations where negative emotions were aroused in relation to activation measures. We merged these subcategories into eight higher categories describing deficits in labour market services, which we finally abstracted into three theoretical categories: (1) experiences of unfairness; (2) lack of control; (3) the mismatch between activation measures and clients' needs.

Experiences of unfairness

Ten of the 28 interviewees mentioned that they had experienced unfairness during activation interventions. Most experiences of unfair treatment concerned different kinds of work training and subsidised employment interventions, including workplace activities. In workplaces, the young people usually worked with other employees, and they inevitably compared their own situation with that of others. Unfair treatment took many different forms concerning rights, work tasks, wages and the circulation of trainees.

The first emotionally problematic feature concerns rights. Helen (aged 29) had a vocational degree, but her work career had not started because she suffers from severe depression, and at the time of the interview, she was recovering. She mentioned that trainees do not have the same legal rights as other workers because they are not entitled to statutory holidays or occupational healthcare. Trainees are not protected by collective agreements, and this inferior position compared with other workers exposes them to experiences of unfair treatment and exploitation (see also Sandelin, 2014; Parkkila-Puranen, 2015). Their weak legal rights also relate to the second feature: their smaller monetary compensation. Trainees receive no salary at all, and for those in subsidised employment the pay is usually significantly poorer than that of permanent staff. Our interviewees did not make unrealistic salary demands: they understood that they were merely trainees or in subsidised employment. However, the lack of proper compensation could foster young people's experiences of their own inferior position and power imbalance compared with other workers.

For example, Maria (aged 28), a very active job seeker and participated in numerous ALMP measures, studied her second vocational degree through apprenticeship training. In

the interview, she said: “it was a little bit depressing when you did three times more work than those who were hired there, and you got like five times worse salary than them, so it did not feel nice”. Larry (aged 30), who suffered from a slowly progressing neurological condition, said that he had real responsibilities, but he was the only one who did not get paid. Both Maria and Larry reflected on exchange relations in their workplaces, and on process of giving and receiving, norms of reciprocity and fairness. Their experiences of unfairness were related to the amount of work and the degree of complexity of the work tasks, for which their receipt of €8 subsidy per day was inappropriate compensation.

The third problem is that working without proper compensation became increasingly problematic over time, because young people increasingly felt that employers were taking advantage of their labour. They started to suspect that employers had never had any real intention to hire them, and that they were just being circulated between workplaces. James (aged 30) graduated as a chef nine years ago and had done occasional part-time work, had also taken part in training and subsidised work interventions James said: “enterprises do not have an interest in hiring trainees, because they are a free workforce for them”. Michael (aged 21), who had taken part in training after he had dropped out from vocational studies, mentioned that he had been a free worker, and after the course he was fired. Peter (aged 26) had problems with alcohol and had recently been homeless for two years, had the same experience as James and Michael. According to Peter: “enterprises do not hire trainees, because when the maximum training time expires, they immediately take a new trainee to replace the previous one”. The young people usually did not realise this until the training had already started. It caused bitterness and disappointment, because they felt that the norms of fair exchange were violated, and they did not receive the benefits they had expected (see [Turner and Stets, 2005](#)). Eight of our interviewees gave similar statements, highlighting the problematic nature of repeated participation in ALMP interventions.

In the most emotionally devastating cases, the young felt that they had been deliberately misled by being given false hope of future employment. For instance, Lucy (aged 27), who had accomplished vocational degrees and was a single parent caring for her preschool-age children at home, had had intense experiences of injustice and felt herself a victim of exploitation:

Well, I have big fucking unfinished business with [company name], who make money from the soft toys that I have designed. I did not get anything from them but the trainee's salary [subsidy of €8 per day]. It was a huge disappointment when I was promised that there might be something for me, and there is lots of repair work in sewing and so on. Then, when we had this meeting with the official in PES and we talked about future work. ... Well, we do not have anything for Lucy, she has done everything already. So I had time to design those dolls, which were then sent to Japan or something, where they manufacture them now. So it was like a big rip-off kind of place.

Despite the promises the employer made to her, Lucy did not receive fair compensation for the work she had done, which was also related to the fact that the workplace had taken economic advantage of the soft toys she had designed. Lucy felt betrayed and resentful when talking about the company. She had had high hopes for the future that were never realised. This illustrates how ALMP exchange networks were perceived as unfair by our research participants.

The fourth problem is that our interviewees occasionally felt that they were given the tasks that no one else wanted to do, which made them feel that they were not respected. For example, Peter said that he spent his days in the workplace “doing all the crappy tasks, like shelving and installing burglar alarms”. Larry said that in one of his many work try-outs he had mainly “made coffee for other workers, put papers in alphabetical order and did other pointless tasks”. The young people felt they were given inferior tasks not because they were incapable of more demanding work, but because their superiors would not let them do such

work. Peter and Larry felt that the situation was unfair, making them less motivated to commit to their tasks.

Lack of control

A sense of control is a key feature in exchange theories concerned with emotional aspects (Lawler and Thye, 1999). The feeling of losing control among long-term unemployed young adults is related to their experiences of coercion, inability to influence their own lives, and risk-taking. Fourteen of our 28 interviewees mentioned such situations. In terms of exchange relations, the power dependency (e.g. Emerson, 1962) between these young adults and PES was significant, as the research participants depended upon PES for valued resources. The lack of control was also related to the fact that the research participants did not usually have the means to reduce that dependency (see Turner and Stets, 2005). A power imbalance refers to “different capabilities to generate rewards and avoid costs” (Lawler and Thye, 1999, p. 222).

The first manifestation of lack of control is coercion. Our interviewees experienced the coercive force of activation measures when they felt forced or pressured to participate, which in many cases was related to the threat of sanctions (e.g. Sandelin, 2014). Some of this coercion was based on the law, and it strongly constrained the young adults’ decision-making power and agency, causing stress and anxiety. For instance, Sam (aged 25), who suffered from learning disabilities and dropped numerous vocational studies, described negative feelings about the obligation to apply for study:

I cannot apply for work, because it causes stomach cramps and nausea. ... But applying for study is even more distressing than job-seeking. I do not believe that I can follow their schedule and get assignments done in time. I just do not believe so. My obligation to apply for study ends next year, so I must consider applying to adult education. If so, I must prepare myself really carefully. I always have a good feeling at the beginning, but then everything falls apart. It has happened so many times before, so it probably will happen again.

Sam described strong somatic symptoms such as “stomach cramps” and “nausea”, demonstrating the strength of his negative emotional responses to the obligation to apply for study. Young people’s obligation to apply for study means that under-25s who lack formal vocational education must apply to a vocational school every year. If they refuse to apply, they might be sanctioned. Sam had tried to start his vocational studies several times but had failed every time, and this explained his extremely pessimistic attitude towards education. He could not explain why all his studies had broken off soon after the beginning, and his lack of understanding perhaps made the situation even more unbearable.

Sam had not requested an exemption from the obligation to apply for study, even though his anxiety disorder and depression might have given him good grounds to do so. That was also why PES had failed to recognise his special situation. Hence he faced the same sanctions and requirements as everyone else. This was an example of exchange relations where PES rewarded desirable behaviour and punished undesirable behaviour (see Molm, 1990): Sam was not capable of the desired behaviour, and negative emotional responses emerged as an outcome. Our data includes a couple of similar cases where the young people had problems with studying or did not know what kind of vocational education they wanted. For them, the obligation to apply for study was an emotional burden which they would have to encounter repeatedly every year until they were 25. They too might have been unable to report their situation to PES.

In addition to the obligation to apply for study, there are also coercive labour market policy features concerning PES courses and employment training. PES workers may not be aware of young people’s experiences of anxiety about these ALMP measures, and the coerciveness may be unintentional. Nevertheless, James said that he was “threatened and

pressed from PES offices to go on pointless courses”; Paul (aged 22), who was recovering from mental health problem and substance misuse, said, “PES offices push me too much to participate”; Larry had “noticed that many of the participants were forced to take part in PES office courses and they had zero motivation”. This gave rise to prejudice against PES courses. For example, James suspected that the real reason for these courses was not to help unemployed individuals but to “beautify unemployment statistics”. Such talk indicated that the young felt forced to participate in interventions by the threat of sanctions. This refers to an exchange relation in which punishment (Molm, 1990) is widely used. Punishments entail risks, as they tend to generate negative emotional responses (Molm, 1994).

The second problem is that the young seemed to experience a lack of opportunities to influence their own situation and decision making – a surprising result given that PES has emphasised client-centred approaches during recent decades. Some of our interviewees were dissatisfied with how the interventions had been planned and conducted, or had felt unable to influence the content of their work. This indicates that PES faces challenges in cooperating and co-planning interventions with employers and vulnerable youth. Some of these problems had not come to the authorities’ attention. Most problems were minor, but some had involved serious mistreatment of unemployed individuals, and even lawbreaking during training and supported employment interventions.

Helen’s experience was the most severe case. She had started subsidised employment in a small enterprise following a job offer from PES. Her employer had financial difficulties and neglected to pay taxes. Helen contacted her trade union and PES, but none of them helped her. She said: “many of us went to talk to them, but they were like they could not have cared less”. Her expression was strong and described her disappointment, anger and lack of control over the situation. Due to her employer’s mistakes, Helen had to pay a large tax bill, placing a significant economic burden on her for quite a long time. Helen’s case also reveals that there may be serious juridical weaknesses related to youth ALMP participation. Such situations might be rare, but they illustrate that ALMP participants can be wholly unable to influence their situation.

Coercive ALMP policies and young people’s inability to influence their situation seemed to lead to risk-taking, which is the third manifestation of the young’s lack of control. ALMPs tend to pressure young adults, who may take unnecessary risks, especially when participating in training and supported employment interventions. Sometimes they are not able to finish the intervention because of their reduced ability to work and function. For instance, Sam said: “I did not go to that training after all, because I just could not go there. So I took sick leave”. Sam had agreed to training offered by PES, but because of personal problems he was unable to even start the training. He managed to avoid sanctions by taking sick leave. In similar circumstances, many long-term unemployed young adults do not know how to handle their problems and simply quit the training. For example, Jack (aged 24), who was recovering from severe drug addiction, said that his job training had started very well until he got toothache and was unable to go to the dentist or talk about his situation to his employer. He said that afterwards he had felt sad that the training had been interrupted in that way. Jack had mental health problems such as anxiety, which inhibited his actions. As a result of the interrupted training, his basic unemployment allowance was discontinued, leading to increasing difficulties in his daily life.

Mismatch between activation measures and clients’ needs

A mismatch between ALMP measures and clients’ needs refers to experiences where everyday exchanges in the context of ALMP measures fail and cause dissatisfaction, a diminished sense of meaning and frustration. There are three separate manifestations of such mismatches in our data: service process problems, problems with intervention content, and

useless interventions. The data includes several examples. Twenty of our 28 interviewees described such experiences, making this the most common emotionally problematic feature of active labour market measures. The measures either did not meet our participants' needs or were useless in terms of their effect and outcome (see [Sandelin, 2014](#)). It has been shown that ill-targeted activation measures can have negative consequences for unemployed individuals who suffer from reduced ability to work or reduced stress tolerance ([Vastamäki, 2010](#)).

The first problem is challenges with service processes, which cause frustration, disappointment and annoyance among young adults. Will (aged 26) reflected on his experiences of regular meetings with PES:

I think that they just put your personal info into their database, and if you are lucky and someone is seeking an employee you might get something out of it, but it's not what has happened to me. It just feels like they put everything onto your shoulders that you are not applying for a job. Actually, the only support I have ever got there is money.

Will had dropped out of vocational school twice. He suffered from depression and social anxiety, which restricted his ability to get work. He felt he had had no support from PES other than money, which frustrated him. Rose (aged 20) had similar problems. She had done previously physically demanding part-time jobs until her health issues made working impossible a few years ago. Since then, Rose has been unemployed. She wondered why she did not get any help from PES and was forced to arrange everything herself even though she needed help and guidance. Both Will and Rose had mental health problems which were not identified or taken into account. The ultimate reason why this had happened was unclear, but Will and Rose now thought that they had been left alone with their problems. This indicates challenges with multisectoral case management, because Will and Rose needed social and healthcare services in addition to PES. Will and Rose referred to a situation where daily face-to-face exchanges had failed in a way that generated negative feelings such as the experience of being alone.

Another problem concerning service processes is connected to the perceived attitudes of the authorities, which is frustrating and makes cooperation with unemployed clients difficult. In general, one's degree of respect and social esteem contributes to one's positive emotional experience ([Lawler and Thye, 1999](#)). For example, Will said: "the attitude should change. You should not be made to feel guilty when you are there". Others had similar experiences. Helen described a situation where she had had a disagreement with a counsellor about the salary for subsidised employment, and she had declined the job offer. She said that the counsellor then "got angry and accusatory", and their cooperation ended there, even though Helen wanted to continue the job counselling. She felt that the situation was unreasonable because she had a good reason to decline the job offer, and she described the experience as "really depressing". Such situations may partly result from personality clashes between clients and officials, but the phenomenon is partly rooted in a mismatch with unemployed clients' rights and responsibilities. It can also diminish trust between officials and long-term unemployed clients, and it can make later recommitment to employment services more difficult.

The second emotionally problematic feature concerns the content of interventions. Today's young adults regard the content of work as extremely important ([Siltala, 2020](#), p. 121), and our interviewees were no exception. That was why some felt that their duties and tasks had not met their expectations or been in line with their education. For example, James strongly criticised his previous subsidised job placement because he only "washed dishes, peeled carrots and carried packages to and from storage", regardless of his being a graduate chef. He felt that these tasks did not fit his vocational degree and made his working there emotionally straining and humiliating. Another common criticism was that interviewees were not given anything meaningful to do. For example, Laura (aged 23) is active and decided to take part in training, as she has not managed to get a job despite having a vocational

degree. Laura said: “we were just me and my friend in the training. We were there for four weeks, and we noticed that there should have been just one person, as there was just not enough to do for two persons”. Larry also pointed to a lack of tasks: he was mainly told to make coffee and put papers into alphabetical order, and he felt idle. For Laura and Larry, the training did not provide the opportunities they wanted to learn new skills, do something important and take responsibility. In other words, they did not see these daily exchanges as sufficiently rewarding, which manifested itself as low commitment. This is a result of a shortage of high-quality training places. PES is also understaffed and unable to intervene in such problems.

The third mismatch problem is ALMP measures whose outcomes are useless to the participants. Interviewees especially criticised PES courses and employment training interventions because “there wasn’t anything new”; “they do not help you to get a job”. Michael stressed:

In my opinion, it is a ridiculous system that you are sent on all kinds of courses and offered as free labour, and then when the course is over, you are kicked out and you get a diploma that does not matter anywhere.

Michael’s experience highlights that PES courses and employment training interventions do not always help participants to find jobs in competitive labour markets. Michael felt that he had participated in a pointless course. This speaks to a central problem of ALMP interventions, which often fail to lead to employment in competitive labour markets, meaning that individuals return to unemployment after participating in such measures. Consequently, these individuals go through the same activation process repeatedly. Ten of our participants mentioned that they were not happy to participate in “courses over and over again”, “where you do not learn anything new”. They found it frustrating but thought that they had no real option other than to participate in the courses. PES has quantitative objectives regarding unemployed people’s activation rates, and this can easily lead to repeated participation, even though it may be impractical from the clients’ point of view.

Discussion

We have focused on the negative emotional consequences of ALMP measures for young adults understanding these policies as transactions and exchanges. Whitworth (2016, p. 412) sees activation based on neoliberal ideology entailing “ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction in its understanding of the subject, the “problem” and the policy “solution.” Neoliberalism emphasises individual responsibility and does not recognise the structural aspects of unemployment. These measures combine “sanctions with minimal self-directed support” (Wright and Patrick, 2019, p. 1), and this is related to problematic aspects of ALMP measures. While ALMP measures have been shown to have beneficial effects on participants, we have found unintended, ambiguous, inconsistent, and contradictory features that can cause emotional harm for long-term unemployed youth. Emotional harm is associated with counterproductive features of ALMP interventions and can diminish those interventions’ positive outcomes. In the worst cases, ALMP interventions can worsen the situations of long-term unemployed youth. Therefore, participation in ALMP interventions can be risky, especially for vulnerable long-term unemployed youth. We used the affect theory of social exchange to describe personal experiences of emotionally negative responses to ALMP interventions. Based on this analysis, we found three problematic ALMP intervention features: (1) experiences of unfairness; (2) lack of control; (3) mismatch between activation measures and unemployed clients’ needs.

Experiences of unfairness are especially related to training and subsidised work interventions. In the affect theory of social change, transactions tend to be related to actors’ experiences of justice and fair treatment. In our data, there were several cases where ALMP measures were experienced as unfair, i.e. when young adults felt that they had been given false

promises of future employment, giving rise to the negative emotional experience that they had been exploited. Young adults in our data did not have the same juridical rights as other workers, and the compensation they received was usually not even close to that of employees in competitive labour markets. Even though ALMPs mimic paid work and produce similar positive psychosocial outcomes to some extent (Sage, 2015b), the two things are not the same. In addition, poor compensation and the lack of juridical rights created an experience of “otherness”, which was strongly associated with negative emotional experiences.

Lack of control was associated with all kinds of ALMP obligations in our data. In particular, mandatory activation programmes seem to be problematic (see also Carter and Witworth, 2017). Our interviewees’ ALMP participation was characterised by a high dependency on non-dependent impersonal actors such as the state and PES, and the exchange relation could force unemployed young adults to obey labour policies, generating the experience of lack of control. The unemployed young adults lacked alternative pathways and were forced to react and respond to ALMPs from disadvantaged social positions in order to receive benefits. Lack of control weakened their abilities to utilise PES services to enhance their employment prospects. In general, sanctions and obligations can also lead to unnecessary risk-taking and to individuals abandoning activation measures – for which they are then economically sanctioned. In particular, uncontrolled interruptions of ALMP measures can be emotionally harmful, because they can lead to deeper economic problems after clients’ unemployment benefits are cut. Because financial strain is connected to a decline in subjective well-being (Ervasti and Venetoklis, 2010), these economic sanctions can foster long-lasting negative emotional burdens. This may help us to understand why some young people disappear from services’ view (Karjalainen and Karjalainen, 2010).

In addition, the mismatch between activation measures and participants’ needs arouse negative emotional responses. This is especially associated with PES courses, employment training and regular meetings. It is partly due to PES’s quantitative activation rate objectives and lack of proper resources to counsel clients and supervise ALMP interventions. Our research participants related this to obscure bureaucracy, general confusion and difficulties with the demands of the ALMPs, PES, training periods, employers’ needs, educational settings, etc. When their needs were not met, unemployed youth felt that positive consequences (rewards) were lacking, which the affect theory of social exchange would see as problematic for motivation and commitment. The theory also suggests that individuals learn from earlier (rewarding or punishing) transaction chains. Some of the young adults in our data felt that they were forced to make repeated investments in practices which they considered pointless or which did not offer them anything new, and this evoked repeated negative feelings.

Experiences of unfairness, lack of control and mismatch between activation measures and unemployed clients’ needs help us to understand emotional harms related to ALMP participation. This is highly problematic, because repeated participation in labour market interventions is typical for the long-term unemployed (Aho *et al.*, 2018; Tuomaala, 2019). It means that the negative side effects of ALMP participation may constitute repeated stressors, especially for the most vulnerable youth. Moreover, because these interventions are usually targeted at most vulnerable youth, this in turn further increases the risk of negative outcomes. The third problem is that PES lack sufficient resources to supervise ALMP interventions, or to reach vulnerable youth to the extent that they should. This makes PES staff incapable of reacting to most of these problematic outcomes.

Conclusion

We have drawn attention to the negative emotions that our interviewees pointed out in relation to ALMP measures. Based on our analysis, we can address three urgent topics for all professionals working with youth activation schemes. The first is that professionals should

be aware of the risks associated with young people's experiences of unfair treatment and should take action to avoid such problems, especially during training and subsidised work interventions. The second point is that economic sanctions do not create work incentives for the most vulnerable youth; instead, they may be destructive of clients' financial situation, emotional well-being and future participation. The third point concerns PES's lack of resources, which prevents PES staff from responding effectively to problematic features of ALMP interventions or devoting enough time to counselling the most vulnerable youth. This reduces the quality of the services and increases the emotionally harmful side effects of ALMP interventions. ALMP interventions also lead too rarely to competitive labour market employment, and that is why most participants return to unemployment after such interventions (Aho *et al.*, 2018; Tuomala, 2019). The return to unemployment after an ALMP intervention can be a depressing emotional experience in itself. This has been observed in other European countries as well (Card *et al.*, 2017; Kluve, 2010). The relatively low effectiveness of ALMP interventions, combined with the coercive nature of labour activation policies and the requirement for active job-seeking, can constitute long-lasting emotionally straining life situations.

Our research indicates that PES users need psychological forms of support and recognition. There is a lack of attention to the psychological wellbeing and needs of disadvantaged PES users. The problem, however, lies deeper in neoliberal ideology, which makes disadvantaged individuals themselves responsible for structural problems such as unemployment. While improving the communication between PES users and counsellors could help solve some harmful emotional consequences of activation measures, the neoliberal ideology behind activation remains a problem. Activation aims to increase labour supply leading to sanctions and conditionality, which put high emotional pressure on disadvantaged young people, who are made to seek non-existent work actively.

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