SPECIAL SECTION - RESEARCH ARTICLE

BETWEEN EVASION AND ACTIVISM
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Political Behavior of German and Swedish Long-Term Unemployed

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ABSTRACT: This comparative article aims to understand the patterns underlying the political behavior of young German and Swedish long-term unemployed individuals. Based on almost 40 qualitative interviews, the analysis follows a grounded theory approach and shows that "unemployment" is not an objective reality that imposes uniform living conditions. Social and political activities diverge considerably, even though our respondents experience similar pressures and sanctions by public opinion, political parties, public administrations, relatives and/or acquaintances. The consequences of unemployment depend on individual mind-sets, support networks and coping strategies. This study identifies informal networks of social relations as one main factor influencing unemployed young peoples' political behavior. Three types of political involvement are shaped by the routines and norms reproduced within their web of social relations in everyday life: evasion, civic minimalism and reluctant activism. The similarities between the German and the Swedish respondents overshadowed the national differences.

KEYWORDS: Long-term unemployment, political participation, informal networks, qualitative methods, Germany, Sweden

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1. Introduction

Increasing rates of unemployment, particularly among younger individuals, have affected most European countries during the preceding decades. This development has intensified scholarly interest in the possible consequences, in particular, the risk of social exclusion and the erosion of political participation (e.g., Hammer 2003; Kieselbach and Traiser 2004). Evidence tends to suggest that unemployed people are less active and interested politically (e.g., Banks and Ullah 1987; Schur 2003). However, researchers have proposed competing explanations. Some stress the role of long-term unemployment and the interactions with public policies and authorities (Jahoda 1982; Rantakeisu 2009). Others maintain that the effect of poverty or social class is more important than unemployment (Kronauer 1998; Cainzos and Voces 2010). Still others exclude direct effects and underline intermediary factors, such as associational involvement or informal networks (Lorenzini 2012; Manning 2014).

Hence, the research findings are inconclusive. The reasons for this limitation are obvious. Unemployment is a legal and administrative category that does not constitute a coherent group of people with similar living conditions and experiences. Further, joblessness is a multidimensional situation that implies several hardships and experiences, for instance, the loss of income, social status, informal contacts, self-esteem and life satisfaction (e.g., Jahoda 1982; Kronauer 1998; Giugni and Lorenzini 2013). The present article attempts to overcome these deficiencies by disentangling the notion of 'unemployment', thus taking into consideration how specific groups of jobless people (e.g., young adults, registered as jobless) experience the situation of being unemployed, particularly in regards to political aspects and implications. This objective requires a qualitative research approach that digs deeper into the everyday life of the unemployed than survey-based research is able to, striving to identify guiding patterns and rationales of political behaviour in an inductive and systematic manner.

This article aims to contribute to such an approach by presenting findings from a comparative study of qualitative interviews with young adults in Sweden and Germany registered as jobless. It aims to answer three questions: In which kinds of political activities are these young, jobless adults involved? How much is their political behaviour related to the way they experience their unemployment, particularly in political terms? And how much are these views and practices moulded by the young adults' everyday lives? Our qualitative and inductive study is based on a sociological conception of political behaviour. We argue that the two notions of 'unemployment' and 'politics' are not abstract elements but rather parts of a very specific reality that people registered as jobless experience in a palpable manner (e.g., interactions with the Public Employment

Services, the PES, exposure to public opinions in the media, pressures from their im-mediate surroundings). At the same time, we assume that young adults' political activi-ties are embedded in the collective structures of their immediate social surroundings; that is, we are not necessarily speaking of individual acts but rather interactively con-structed practices moulded by the traits of the young people's everyday worlds.

2. Research findings and theoretical assumptions

Research has recurrently dealt with the political behaviour of the jobless, though it struggles with a number of descriptive and analytic questions. In descriptive terms, there are several diverging findings in regards to levels and forms of political activities. While earlier studies argued that unemployed people show lower voter turnout rates and little trust in political institutions and politicians (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Banks and Ullah 1987; Schur 2003), more recent work has stressed that apathy and fatalism are as probable as the active support of radical and/or anti-systemic parties (e.g., Bay and Blekesaune 2002; Falk and Zweimüller 2005). Additionally, collective protests by jobless people have been quite diffused since the 1990s in many European countries (Baglioni, Baumgarten, Chabanet and Lahusen 2008; Chabanet and Faniel 2011; La-husen 2012). Finally, some argue that political disengagement only affects conven-tional forms of participation, while personalised politics in terms of local volunteerism, consumer activism and support for specific issues and palpable causes is on the rise, particularly among young people (Dalton 2008; Harris, Wyn and Jones 2010; see also Gauthier 2003; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2012).

In analytic terms, scholars disagree about the relevance of unemployment as an ex-planatory factor. According to the classical studies, joblessness has a detrimental effect on political participation given a generalised mental state of resignation, fatalism, apa-thy and a general alienation from mainstream politics (Jahoda 1982; Breakwell 1986). Some refer to public policies and authorities, particularly to the Public Employment Services (the PES), arguing that these interactions affect the unemployed people's atti-tudes towards politics and how they experience their say in society (Starrin, Rantakeisu and Forsberg 1999; Rantakeisu 2009; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014). Scholars of political behaviour qualify this proposition. Ear-lier studies have argued that it is not necessarily joblessness but rather a low socio-economic status that leads to political disenchantment and alienation (Saenger 1945; Schlozman and Verba 1979). Others have insisted that unemployment is only relevant insofar as it entails a loss of important resources (such as money, contacts, civic skills

and norms; Verba and Nie 1972; Brady, Verba and Sschlozman 1995). On a general level, dissent about the effect of social classes on political behaviour prevails when referring to the discussions about class dealignment (Evans 2002; Knutsen 2006; Cainzos and Voces 2010). When focussing on vulnerable groups, the main issue does not seem to be unemployment but new cleavages and processes of social and political exclusion (Kronauer 1998; Hammer 2003; Giugni and Lorenzini 2013).

Research has also made use of comparative studies in order to explain the effect of unemployment. These scholars were interested in the effect of public policies and institutions. In fact, different welfare states might perform differently in combating hardships and improving confidence amongst their clients, e.g., when comparing the egalitarian, universalist and generous approach of the Swedish welfare state with the German system and with its emphasis on stratification, subsidiarity and familial responsibilities (Esping-Anderson 1990; Gallie and Paugam 2000). Available evidence is limited, however, and encourages a rather sceptical stance. For example, Bay and Blekesaune (2002) do not find any significant relations between the welfare state and political confidence amongst young jobless people. Carle (2003) found more similarities between the political opinions of unemployed young people living in countries with different welfare regimes (Scotland and Sweden) than between those from the same regime type (Sweden and Denmark). It is possible that differences between welfare regimes decrease as a reaction to the introduction of activation policies and public management reforms at the street-level bureaucracy in most European countries (e.g., Gilbert 2002; Berkel and Valkenburg 2007).

These research debates have presented important insights; however, they are too generic and inconclusive to deliver satisfactory knowledge. Only a few of these studies addressed young jobless people's political behaviour in Germany and Sweden (e.g., Bay and Blekesaune 2002; Carle 2003; Giugni and Lorenzini 2013). Hence, caution is required when drawing preliminary conclusions. The general picture painted by previous research suggests that the political behaviour of young jobless people is shaped by various forces (apathy, engagement, radicalisation etc.). This may imply the existence of various groups of people with different types of behaviours. Indeed, unemployment is a broad category and is not necessarily one social reality with similar life conditions, shared problems and uniform political responses. This may also imply that welfare policies and institutions are a contextual factor only indirectly linked to the situation of the unemployed young people. All in all, it seems necessary to move closer to the everyday life of young jobless people in order to better understand the relation between unemployment and political behaviour. This has three conceptual and theoretical implications.

First, it is necessary to redirect the analysis of joblessness from formal categories to reported experiences. Obviously, unemployment tends to create a number of problems: loss of income, contacts, recognition, identity and self-esteem. However, research has consistently shown that the problems unemployed people experience and report in their accounts may vary considerably. In fact, the impact of unemployment on the jobless people's daily life and wellbeing is moderated by the individuals' mindset, by the social support they receive and by the coping strategies they develop (Broman, Hamilton and Hoffman 2001; Hobbins 2015; Huffman, Culbertson, Waymenta and Irving 2015). This also applies to the political dimension of unemployment, about which much less evidence is available. Unemployment is an economic and social reality but also a political one when considering the benefits and obligations stipulated by public policies and implemented by public administrations. Research has convincingly highlighted that policy reforms of welfare retrenchment and activation are increasing the pressure on the unemployed (Berkel and Valkenburg 2007), and this particularly applies to young adults (Kieselbach and Traiser 2004; Grimmer and Hobbins 2014). Hence, we must determine whether and how young jobless people experience these pressures in their everyday life, e.g., whether they see themselves exposed to 'political talk' in the media and their local communities and how they experience interactions with the PES. Moreover, we must look at the coping strategies that young jobless people develop to fence off or moderate these pressures.

Second, studies of political behaviour by unemployed young adults must consider that the political activities are eminently social. Voting, protesting or donating is not an individual choice by atomised citizens; these activities are shaped by the beliefs, norms and practices of the informal networks that citizens belong to (Sinclair 2012). Various research strands have validated the importance of social relations, networks and community ties. Overall, these factors seem to alleviate the detrimental effects of unemployment on political inactivity and alienation. Studies on social capital, for instance, argue that involvement in associations increases the level of political knowledge, civic skills and belief in the political efficacy of political participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Teorell 2003; Maloney and Deth 2010). Also, informal networks (family, friends, acquaintances etc.) play such a role (Plutzer 2002; Sinclair 2012; Manning 2014). In particular, peer group influence has become an important issue for analysis (McClurg 2003; Barber, Stone, Hunt and Eccles 2009), particularly amongst young people (Yates and Youniss 1998, Manning 2014). Similar findings are advanced by the study of social movements, showing that informal networks are important in socialising and mobilising individuals into (unconventional) protest activities (Diani and McAdam 2003). The important role of organisational and informal networks has also been cor-

roborated in relation to protests by the unemployed (Baglioni *et al*. 2008; Lahusen 2012; Baglioni and Giugni 2014).

These findings paint a clear picture but might not apply to all unemployed young people. We know that social capital is unequally distributed (Lin 2000), which implies that the networks and forms of social support that the unemployed young people rely on may vary (Huckfeldt 1979). At the same time, we should not take for granted that informal networks are always conducive to political participation. Previous research tends to assume that associational and informal networks share civic and participatory orientations, but what happens if political alienation is a shared conviction and practice? In statistical terms, unemployed young people tend to speak less about politics with their friends than the employed (Bay and Blekesaune 2002), thus pointing to possible group norms. In sum, families and peers might contribute to political engagement or disengagement, depending on the implicit ideas and norms of political behaviour reproduced within these networks (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Carle 2003).

Third, we must broaden our conceptual approach to political behaviour. Most studies have measured political participation by means of predefined and classified items (e.g., conventional, formalised or direct, unconventional and informal activities). The focus is on activities geared towards influencing political processes within the political system and society at large (Marsh 1974; Deth 1986; Teorell, Torcal and Montero 2007). While this approach has its advantages regarding deductive and comparative analyses, it risks ignoring or misinterpreting the political expressions of marginalised groups (O'Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones and McDonagh 2003). Political behaviour is not necessarily restricted to the dyad between participation and non-participation, as shown by studies amongst youth (Plutzer 2002; Amnå and Ekman 2014). At the same time, research has stressed that abstentionism is very often a political choice (Diplock 2002; Solvak and Vassil 2015). Moreover, vulnerable groups tend to react to political reality by means of evasion, dissimulation or false compliance (Scott 1985; Lahusen 2014). Consequently, we must engage in an open-minded, inductive analysis, meaning that we must use an analytic definition of political participation that, in empirical terms, is open enough. Thus, in this article, we define political behaviour as *all* activities aimed at defending and/or furthering the individuals' needs and interests against political pressures.

3. Methods and data

The analysis in this study is based on qualitative interviews with unemployed young people in Cologne, Germany and Karlstad, Sweden. The interviews were conducted between February and December 2010 within the framework of a comparative study on youth unemployment in six European countries. The sample consisted of 37 young adults between the ages of 20 and 34. All participants were unemployed for at least 12 months, although most respondents were exposed to even longer periods of unemployment, and in some cases alternated with shorter fixed-term employment or on-call jobs. All respondents were officially registered as unemployed and, thus, maintained relations to public authorities. A table with the essential information about our interview partners is included in the annex.

Our interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions that addressed various aspects of unemployment, reaching from their personal background, financial situation and relations to employment agency, politics and political activism. Each thematic block started with a general invitation to describe or account for the issue at stake (e.g., 'What is politics to you?' or 'Are you politically active in any form?'), followed by more specific questions reflecting detailed aspects of the topic (for example, politics, trust, interest in politics and political activism). Our interviewees also provided complementary information while speaking about other topics, for instance, when describing their relations to the public employment services and welfare associations, their local communities and informal networks. This strategy of interlocking topics was also used in regards to social relations and associational involvement. Our aim was not to map extended networks but to identify significant close relations, thus following respondents' own relevance structures. The interviews lasted between half an hour and two and a half hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Sampling and data analysis were committed to an exploratory, interpretative and inductive approach and adapted various principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser 1992, Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014; see also Charmaz 2000; Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006). Our interview material conforms to the requirements of these approaches: the semi-structured guidelines used in our research are a means of 'intensive interviewing' (Charmaz 2006, 26), and our sample composition is in line with the aims of theoretical sampling. Throughout our research process, we recruited very different respondents (e.g., in regards to gender, age, household structure, migration background, educational attainment). This allowed us to develop theoretical generalisations on the basis of constant comparisons between dissimilar cases. The choice of the two cities followed

the same rationale: similar unemployment rates[1] based on data from the two national Public Employment Services indicate that we are dealing with locally relevant groups. At the same time, contextual factors diverge considerably (e.g., population, economic structure, welfare system etc.), thus assuring variance within our sample.

Also, in regards to data analysis, we were guided by principles of interpretative and inductive inquiry and theorising (Charmaz 2000; Mills *et al*. 2006; Miles *et al*. 2014). The exploration used a microanalysis and open coding of the interviews in order to grasp all discernible elements of the topics (e.g., different expressions of political behaviour). On this basis, we identified dominant or core categories with their main dimensions (e.g., patterns of political activity, relations to peers) and inquired into the interrelations between them (e.g., the role of peers in 'going politics'). The interrelations between the dominant categories allowed us to develop different types of political behaviours and identify what the main rationale of each of them was. Finally, we contextualised these findings within the social and institutional environment of the young adults we interviewed. Our analytical process was not divided into consecutive steps but involved a constant shift between a close inspection of the empirical material and theoretical reflections (Kitchener, Kirkpatrick and Whipp 2000).

4. Analysis and presentation of findings

Our respondents provide a very rich picture of their beliefs, experiences and practices. The variance within our interview sample is remarkable as well as across countries. Some unemployed young adults conform to the expected situation of severe deprivation, isolation and apathy. However, other respondents maintain a decent life, conserve an extended web of social relations and keep an optimistic attitude. In this respect, our findings confirm previous research (Broman *et al*. 2001; Huffman *et al*. 2015). The personal experiences of unemployment are so different because some young adults are able to mobilise social support from their families and friends (e.g., money, goods, contacts, encouragement) and develop coping strategies (e.g., cashless leisure activities and exchange of goods, moonlighting and voluntary work) that alleviate hardships and enrich their everyday lives. These arguments allow an understanding

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[1] Figures from 2010 show that, in Köln, the unemployment rate was 9.5% of the population of the employable age (18-64), while on a national level, the equivalent rates were 7.7% (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2011). In Karlstad, the unemployment rate was 9.6% of the population of the employable age (18-64), while on a national level, the equivalent rates were 8.7% (Arbetsförmedlingen 2014).

as to why the differences between Swedish and German respondents concerning political behaviour are less pronounced than the variation within the city samples.

4.1. Unemployment as common experience

These observations raise fundamental questions. Is unemployment a relevant social category when analysing political activities? And do the experiences that young adults make as officially registered unemployed affect the way they think and act politically? Our data reveals a complex picture that requires differentiations. As we will illustrate in the following, our respondents voice different opinions about politics, politicians, the PES and their caseworkers. However, a closer inspection of the underlying perceptions and convictions shows a number of similarities. In the first place, our unemployed respondents explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that others consider them to be unemployed (see also Schneider and Ingram 1993; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014). All of them testify that this is a bad thing to be, and all feel pressured to look for jobs, accept any kind of work or training measures offered and quit receiving benefits. Several respondents feel exposed to criticism by politicians (Mary: 'They upbraid the unemployed'), pressurised by the PES (Camilla: 'Even if we have a conservative government, we live in a damn communist country where they constantly want to control us: what you do and how you do it') and even by their relatives ('She won't make it, won't accomplish anything, won't become anyone', which is what Hanna says her siblings think about her). Others dissociate themselves from the stigma but acknowledge that it applies to others and that pressures and sanctions may be necessary (Nicole: 'Since it's made so easy [to get money from the PES], people think that they don't have to do anything'). Hence, all young respondents are well aware that they live under the scrutiny of public authorities, politicians, the mass media and even their parents, friends and acquaintances. Moreover, many interviews show that this experience is collective, even generational. Magnus, for instance, reports that 'Granma and the lot, they've said things like "no job, uh, shameful." Guess it was a lot like that among elder generations'. Cansu complains that her parents and uncles, who have had full-time jobs and are financially protected (pensions, home owning), 'always grumble: "why don't you go to work?"' She feels misjudged, since all she gets is temporary, part-time and badly paid jobs. Thus, their families seem unable or unwilling to understand that today's situation of precarious labour markets entails more problems and less hopes for young adults' future.

A second similarity was the shared disappointment with the political world. The main problem they see is that political institutions and public authorities are not delivering what they should. Our respondents provide different reasons for this bad performance: Politicians are either unwilling to help because they are dishonest, selfish and heartless or they are unable to deliver due to external constraints, power games and the complexity of the issues. 'It's a damned power play. That's what it is. And election promises' (Camilla). On a more general level, the unemployed criticise institutionalised politics and public administrations as 'organised irresponsibility'. Politics does not provide help but makes believe: 'They're just taking the piss out of us', says Daniel. The same holds for the PES: 'It's more of a control room than a mediating agency' (Viktor). Several Swedish respondents are less dissatisfied with their caseworkers and rather blame 'the system' on an administrative level when they feel they are not receiving the help they were expecting. However, overall, we see that the young adults have very little confidence in the willingness and/or capability of public institutions and their representatives to care and help.

4.2. Patterns of political engagement

These indications suggest that long-term unemployed young adults share a similar political reality that is built on external political powers, pressures and sanctions and furnished with political disenchantment and mistrust. One might expect that this shared reality would lead to a generalised disposition to abstain from political activities. However, as will be shown in the following when describing political activities and relations to public institutions, this is not the case. Obviously, there are intervening factors that moderate the impact of political disenchantment and alienation. We argue that these factors can be found in the structure of the respondents' everyday life. Three types of political behaviour were identified in the interview material: the 'evaders', the minimalist citizens and the activists against all odds. In the following, we will describe their main patterns of political involvement and analyse how this involvement is constructed within the respondents' everyday lives and informal networks.

The evaders
This type of political behaviour comprises people that abstain from institutionalised politics of all sorts: no street protests or strikes, petitions, contacting politicians or filling complaints. Most respondents of this group are convinced non-voters and even testify to never having participated in elections: 'Actually, since I'm 18' (Tessa). Politics

is so markedly beyond their imagination that it is difficult to address this issue altogether. 'We'll try', Marvin offers, just to close the topic a couple sentences later. It is expressive that these young adults are also very detached from public administrations, primarily by avoiding contact with the employment agency and caseworkers. If necessary, using trickery, as in the case of Daniel: 'I never accommodated to that [one-Euro-jobs]. […] They tried, but usually I have been able to pull through a little longer if I reported sick', he says. The attempt to keep politics out of everyday life even leads to ruling out any type of political talk among relatives and friends. And when addressing political news cannot be avoided, they come to the conclusion that politics is negative: it is bald talk.

This approach is related to the way they experience politics in their life: as an external force governed by a will to deceive and a will to dominate and control. In the words of Emma: 'A lot of counsellors have tried to force me, said "you've got to do this or that to be allowed to participate"'. The experiences of control and conditioning also hold for their perceptions of the PES: being without employment is not necessarily the core problem, as some respondents are unable to work or have other priorities or solutions, and being exposed to constant pressures to take up any kind of job or training measure is what strains the jobless people of this group. The same holds for those who do not experience the pressure from the PES in a negative way. These respondents feel hassled more strongly by the media's reporting of political messages or by their relatives. Hence, these young adults must decide how to behave politically within a situation they perceive as objectively predefined, subjugating and thus full of external expectations and pressures. The most radical strategy used by these jobless adults is evasion, which is evident in an explicit decision not to invest any energy in an irresponsive system by refraining from any acts of claims making (e.g., voting, protesting, writing, filing complaints, even talking about politics). In a less drastic version, no energy is invested in bargaining with state authorities, and contacts with their caseworkers are reduced to the required minimum.

The political beliefs and practices of these 'evaders' are marked by strictness and intransigence if compared with the two following types. This posture can be explained by two traits of their everyday life. On the one hand, some 'evaders' report suffering from personal problems ranging from mental illness or neuropsychological disorders to drug addiction or imprisonment that affected and often limited their capabilities to maintain stable social contact with friends and support from relatives. Some live in marked isolation and with evaporated trust in others. Others have friends who may have problems of their own. In part, their relation to politics is shaped by their general views of humankind, which was apparent when Marvin was asked if he trusts politicians: 'Can you

trust anyone nowadays? I don't know'. The persistence of their inactivity is related to their attempts to fence themselves and their everyday lives off from contact with the public and political realm. These young people can hardly bear the additional pressures that politicians, public administrations and their relatives are putting on them as jobless people. The main objective is to preserve autonomy in their own matters within an environment that is perceived to be unsympathetic and intrusive, and evasion is the chosen strategy.

On the other hand, this posture is a socially constructed, collective practice of excluding institutionalised politics from their life. Not all young adults who are close to the group of 'evaders' have a troubled life and are caught in unruly cliques and groups. However, most of them have few contacts with relatives, and some have only a couple of reliable friends. Often, the number of acquaintances with whom one might share conversations and activities beyond everyday life routines, such as housekeeping, looking for a job, going out or meeting people, is also reduced. Informal networks not only tend to be small but are also homogeneous in one respect: the absence of institutionalised politics. Among 'evaders' who have friends, these are reported to be utterly indifferent to politics. The intransigence of their inactivity in politics is thus the result of group norms and pressures. In fact, respondents attested that nobody within their microcosm is political. For them, taking an apolitical stance is normal, which applies to Magnus: 'That's the way it is among young people today. Some may be familiar with it, but in my social circle, we haven't mentioned the word in…ever, I think'. Hence, the 'evaders'' everyday lives are ruled by shared views and expectations: politics is defined as so awkward, disturbing, uninteresting and/or harmful that these young adults try to keep away from it collectively.

The minimalist citizens

This group has a 'minimalist' approach to politics. Their activities are tied to representative democracy and, thus, to elections. Indeed, what they report to do is to go voting. Few respondents have participated (rather unwillingly) in strikes (e.g., trade unions, students, parents in kindergarten). Hence, beyond electoral politics, there is almost no activity. In regards to the PES, these jobless people maintain more regular contacts and are even engaged in negotiations and/or conflicts with caseworkers. Given that he looks for information on the internet or from debt counselling associations, Jens explains: 'I mean, I know what I'm entitled to, right?' Overall, there is an explicit civic orientation in both areas of activities: they know their civic rights and entitlements as well as their civic duties.

These young adults join in the criticism of institutionalised politics outlined before. They are more outspoken regarding electoral politics, as they see the need to reflect their own participation, even though they are as critical of parliamentary democracy as the 'evaders'. In these views, politics is a professional 'business' governed by a will to make believe, or – as many respondents say – a will to deceive people. Lukas asserts: 'Just a lot of lies… [..] It's actually pretty easy to see through all the bullshit they bring'. Similar objections regard the PES. What these respondents criticise is that the PES does not solve the problems they are assumed to solve: to facilitate the entrance into the labour market. 'They seem to be there to check on people, not to help them' (Viktor). Instead, they administer the registered job seekers and recipients of benefits. Thomas quotes a fictitious caseworker: 'I am just in charge of crossing off the register'.

But why do these young adults contribute to the reproduction of a political system that, according to them, is built on deception? Why are they less uncompromised than the 'evaders'? A first hint is provided by the civic duties mentioned by this group: 'I simply have the feeling that it's my duty to vote' (Hanna). On first sight, previous political socialisation might be the guiding mechanism, but this argument is not convincing given that 'evaders' also report to have learned about democracy and the virtues of elections in school or from families. It is rather the immediate social environment that is of importance to understand why participatory norms are (constantly) being re-enacted. Two features of their informal networks merit particular attention.

On the one hand, this group of respondents is strongly rooted in local communities. Some have lived in the same neighbourhood since birth; others live there by choice, given partners and/or friends with a solid local anchorage. In both cases, this pattern creates social involvement within the community. Consequently, the feeling of belongingness to a specific community is more apparent. Not surprisingly, respondents from this group most severely and explicitly experience prejudices within the public and private sphere of life and, thus, a lack of recognition and increasing depreciation while being unemployed.

This assumption is validated when, on the other hand, looking at the way the 'minimalist' young adults describe their informal networks. William's girlfriend is a committed Green voter, and she convinced him about voting and involvement in environmental issues. Also, in other interviews with this group of people, we find similar references to 'political authorities' representing shared beliefs and norms in their immediate environment. Fredrik has 'conscious university people' in his close surroundings and 'a lot of nerd friends… For instance, we discuss legislation about internet security a lot'. These respondents sense that these expectations are tied to sanctions, such as the propensity to grant or deny social recognition and approval. For instance, Hanna up-

held a minimal interest in politics, 'so I don't come across as being daft'. These feelings are tied to her relationship with her mother, who is quite versed in these matters and with whom she meets regularly.

Hence, the minimalist approach towards political behaviour is primarily an expression of conformism and ritualism: they participate in elections as a means to live up to the expectations of their peers or families, even if they do not believe in the efficacy of their acts. They aim to overcome one problem associated with joblessness: social recognition. Respondents are aware that their behaviour entails a paradox, which they cannot solve. Voting becomes a disappointing process of trial and error (Andreas: 'You want to believe that your vote will have an influence, but I have the feeling that it won't change much. The Swedish party system is really just a big mess') or an absurd ritual (Hanna: 'I have voted according to haircut'). In these cases, electoral voting is not primarily an instrumental act to achieve individual and collective aims. Instead, it is a performative strategy to express membership in a political community.

The activists against all odds

The third group is made up of the respondents who also attest to acting politically beyond the ballot box. They go to elections, they have attended several street protests and/or they write in political blogs. Moreover, all report to regularly discussing politics with families and friends. Hence, they can be considered to be consciously politically active, and they do openly describe themselves in these terms. This group shares the criticism of institutionalised politics with the other two groups and the belief that politics is governed by a will to control and to deceive. However, these respondents make a considerable turn in their perception and definition of politics. To them, politics is an unavoidable and inescapable aspect of social life, for the good and the bad. Societies cannot do without it because they require laws and regulations. But even the most private aspects of everyday life are infused by these politics, as illustrated by Joakim: 'Politics is in the family, so to speak, at the micro level. Politics is also between friends'. Thus, according to this view, politics is about shaping things, either at the societal level or within everyday life.

For this group of respondents, political behaviour is a contradictory activity as well. On the one side, the political efficacy of conventional participation is limited given the deficiencies of representative politics. The same applies to unconventional activities, following Cansu's experiences: 'I mean, you can't change anything. Demonstrations, strikes, it doesn't matter'. However, these respondents are more confident that they can make a difference in their immediate environment, such as Ilhan, complaining to his caseworker about his inability to give him some sort of internship or work: 'Or this

is my last visit here [at the PES]'. A similar experience is reported by Joakim, who writes in political blogs and in newspapers: 'I try to give others different ways to look at things', he states, 'because a lot of people just go along and vote without having understood the core of the parties' politics'.

We are obviously dealing with unenthusiastic activists who have reservations regarding the efficacy of their political engagement but who are somehow pushed into political activity. Again, informal networks provide revealing insights. Family relations may seem a likely source of political involvement. However, we found few indications of this. Instead, there are references to friends and acquaintances. 'Doing politics' is part of their regular pattern of socialising with peers, either informally or in terms of shared memberships in civic groups or organisations. Cansu points to a number of her friends who are politically active in leftist parties and organisations. Although she dislikes the political impetus of her friends, she is aware that political talk and action are unavoidable qualities of this friendship. 'I always go to demonstrations. Because of my friends'. And Ilhan socialises with peers in the socialist party, even with the ambition to become a member of the Swedish Parliament, which is a dream he shares with Jacob.

Hence, although these respondents, like the other two groups, regard political participation as rather futile and ineffective, they keep 'doing politics' given social and expressive needs: they like to talk and do political things with their friends, they like to express similar convictions along with others and they like to make collective public statements. In doing so, they re-enact social expectations and norms: to be well informed; to learn more about societal problems and the manner in which politics work; and to speak out for basic rights and against injustice. Consequently, being integrated into circuits of political activity and 'doing politics' with others seem to be the essential factors that lead to political activity.

4.3 Discussion and contextualisation of findings

The analysis of our interviews with long-term unemployed people allowed the identification of three types of political engagement, which we called 'evaders', 'minimalist citizens' and 'activists against all odds'. The disenchantment with institutionalised politics and the public authorities, such as the PES, throughout the data was striking. There was little confidence in neither the problem-solving capacity nor the responsiveness or the accountability of politicians and bureaucrats. However, the levels and forms of political behaviour diverged considerably, suggesting that these differences are due to certain factors moderating the individual's political attitudes. Our inductive approach

identified one predominant factor that can explain these differences: informal networks. A comparison of the three groups helps to unveil three important dimensions. 'Evaders' maintain informal networks within which abstention and evasion are a collective practice of dealing with political pressures. First, contacts with politically interested people are conducive for deliberate political engagement in the public and private domain. The two other active groups illustrate that the chances of being intentionally politically active increase with the size of the networks and, thus, the probability to have 'politicised' contacts. Second, social relations are part of local communities and/or groups with shared norms and expectations. Participation in the public domain also depends on the rootedness of ideas and norms of political citizenship within the young adults' environment. Here, the role of 'political authorities', such as family members, friends or acquaintances, is of particular importance. Third, we have seen that political activism in the public and private domain also requires the constant re-enactment of these norms and beliefs. In this respect, peers seem to be the decisive actor since, in many respects, political participation is tied to the performative act of 'doing politics' *together* (discussing, protesting, boycotting etc.).

These findings are even corroborated when looking at the role of voluntary organisations and associational involvement. Some 'evaders' and 'minimalists' argued that they were dragged into protest activities by unions, welfare associations or staff from kindergartens. Yet, they remained distant to these organisations. Moreover, even if some of the 'activists against all odds' mentioned organisations, the emphasis was on the relation to other members or participants within and outside the organisation. In fact, organised civil society has problems with reaching out to the (young) unemployed, as substantiated by scholarly writings (e.g., Baglioni and Giugni 2014). This also regards protest groups aimed at mobilising their own jobless members (Lahusen 2014). Organisations seem to matter less than informal networks amongst members and supporters. And, even here, relations to peers appear to be the crucial mobilising mechanism.

Our analyses came across various socio-demographic characteristics such as educational attainment and the family's class background, gender, age or migration experience. Moreover, we detected some differences between the Swedish and German interview data. In both respects, these were not the dominant factors patterning political behaviour because the different groups do not reflect different social classes, age groups, gender roles or national samples but run across them. This observation does not exclude the possibility that statistical analyses might detect secondary or partial effects from these factors. Our inductive approach followed a different rationale: it was geared towards uncovering core categories and predominant dimensions associated

with political behaviour. Following this analytic process, informal networks emerged as a key factor.

However, our data also provides several indications that social-structural and contextual factors do matter, albeit on a secondary level. A first hint is given by the group sizes of our sample. Even though our two city samples are not representative, and even though we could not assign all respondents unequivocally to these (predominantly analytic) groups, we do have more evaders in the German sample, while minimalists and activists prevail amongst Swedish respondents (see table in the annex). We propose two interpretations. On the one hand, the different group sizes seem to mirror different social classes and levels of vulnerability, at least in Germany (e.g., when considering educational attainment as proxy). Indeed, we have shown above that the evaders struggle most severely with vulnerability. And even though informal networks and group norms are the dominant factors patterning their political behaviour, our data indicates that informal networks and group norms interact with class and vulnerability; for instance, we learned from several 'evaders' and some minimalists that their informal networks are similarly affected by unemployment, vulnerability and social degradation (e.g., Huckfeldt 1979; Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

On the other hand, the different group sizes tend to suggest that differences between cities and countries also matter. Our data substantiates this supposition. First, Swedish respondents do criticise party politics and bureaucratic problem handling but are more satisfied with the individual caseworkers and counsellors' ambitions of service mindedness. More German respondents are disillusioned by public authorities: for many, the public domain is marked by a strong social gap between ordinary 'small men' and political 'elites'; they experience social benefits as a system of sanctions that curtails their civic rights by exposing them to social deprivations; they depict the PES as a heartless bureaucratic machine, and they criticise the irreverent attitudes of the counsellors. Swedish respondents conform more readily to their civic duties, while only German respondents report conflicts, oppositions and protests to the PES (questioning decisions, filling complaints etc.).

These findings may only paint a partial picture because our qualitative inquiry is based on a small and non-random sample. However, these 'secondary observations' could encourage further research by identifying institutional, cultural or political context factors that seem to be relevant at the micro-level. Institutional factors seem to matter, e.g., when considering the much stronger impetus of the Swedish administration on customer satisfaction as a reaction to European-wide, new public management-oriented reforms (Weishaupt 2010). Cultural differences appear to matter when looking at status-driven versus egalitarian norms that guide the interpersonal encoun-

ters and relations between citizens and the state. Finally, political contexts seem to matter when considering the fact that Germany has experienced an intense period of street protests by the jobless and precariously employed between 1995 and 2005, which were much less developed in Sweden, thus only generating 'renitent clients' in Germany (Chabanet and Faniel 2011; Lahusen 2012).

5. Conclusions

The analysis of young jobless adults' political beliefs and activities has generated findings that promise to bring new insights to long-standing research debates. Previous studies have recurrently inquired into the effects of unemployment on political behaviour (e.g., Saenger 1945; Jahoda 1982; Kronauer 1998; Hammer 2003; Cainzos and Voces 2010) as well as among youth and young adults (e.g., Bay and Blekesaune 2002; Lorenzini 2012; Baglioni and Giugni 2014). However, there is little consensus among scholars, even though findings tend to indicate that unemployment is not very relevant when controlling for other factors (e.g., poverty, class, social capital). In this study, we argue that the problem of previous analysis is the vagueness of the concept of unemployment. Joblessness is a multidimensional phenomenon: it is associated with diverse hardships (i.e., loss of income, contacts, social status, recognition, identities), and it is experienced very differently by different groups of jobless people. Hence, our inquiry was guided by the conviction that an adequate analysis must disentangle this research object in regards to dimensions and groups.

Therefore, our study focussed on the political behaviour of the registered long-term unemployed. It was geared towards exploring whether unemployment is experienced as a political reality marked by power structures, pressures and sanctions and whether young jobless adults are engaged in defending and/or furthering their needs and interests against these pressures. The inductive analysis of 37 interviews with young adults showed that this was clearly the case for registered unemployed. Indeed, all respondents reported experiencing pressures and sanctions by public opinion and political parties, public administrations and employment services from their local communities, relatives and/or acquaintances. Interestingly, all respondents felt controlled and curtailed, even though they had different opinions in regards to the usefulness or necessity of these pressures. As shown by previous studies (see Starrin *et al.* 1999; Rantakeisu 2009; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Kumlin and Stadelmann-Steffen 2014), these experiences deeply affect them. Some respondents even argued that this situation is a col-

lective one, i.e., they see themselves as a generation exposed to precarious labour markets, ineffective administration and public reproaches.

These findings lead us to a conclusion that highlights a neglected aspect. Unemployment might mean very different things, but being registered as unemployed is a political reality described in similar terms by our respondents. Yet, when listening to their accounts, their experiences do diverge. We identified three problems associated with their situation: a lack of autonomy, a lack of social and civic recognition as well as barriers thwarting the realisations of their aspirations. Our inductive approach allowed forming three groups of respondents that developed different strategies of coping with these pressures. The 'evaders' struggle with intrusive controls of a political environment they perceive as unchangeable and coercive. Due to considerable personal troubles and limited support, they developed a defensive strategy of evasion to preserve the little space of autonomy. The 'minimalist citizens' are quite different in their ability to cope with hardships; however, they experience unemployment as a loss of social and civic recognition, both by public authorities or their private surrounding. Their political activities are conventional and minimalist because they firmly believe that participation is inefficient but necessary to confirm civic rights and duties and, thus, claim membership in society. The 'activists against all odds' share the belief in the inefficacy of conventional participation but see politics as an inescapable element of (private) life. Hence, unemployment is a fully political condition involving public and private strains and obstacles. Political activities are thus part and parcel of a generalised attempt to shape their personal life against pressures and expectations from others.

Our study allows drawing a further conclusion that is in line with previous research: unemployment and its individual consequences depend on mindsets, support networks and coping strategies (Broman *et al*. 2001; Huffman *et a*l. 2015). Our inquiry has highlighted one such factor: informal networks of social relations. In our analysis, this factor emerged as the main category impinging on political behaviour. It also helped to differentiate between the three groups. 'Evaders' have a restrained web of social relations, and their conduct mirrors group norms devoted to collectively fencing off from the polluted world of politics. 'Minimalist citizens' refer to expectations voiced by their local communities and specific 'political authorities' amongst their relatives or friends, with whom they reproduce the belief in participatory duties. Finally, 'activists against all odds' report that politics is essentially what they do when socialising with peers. In all three cases, respondents explicitly report about group norms and their constraining impact on individual behaviour. The similarities between German and Swedish respondents were remarkable in regards to their political views, judgments and activities.

These insights underline a conclusion stressed by previous studies: political activity is an eminently social phenomenon, i.e., embedded in everyday life and patterned by informal networks (Sinclair 2012). Political acts are rarely individual choices but more commonly collectively enacted practices. In some respects, this finding conforms to what we know from research about political behaviour, social capital and/or political protest analysis (e.g., Plutzer 2002; Gordon and Taft 2011; Diani and McAdam 2003; Balgioni and Giugni 2014). However, previous research focussed on political socialisation, i.e., on the way that individuals acquire participatory skills and norms in their life course. Our data shows that patterns of political behaviour may very well change due to the experiences that unemployed young people make. This is often experienced as a process of gradual disenchantment and alienation. Hence, political practices must be constantly re-enacted and reproduced, which is why all political activities we identified were tied back to current networks and practices.

Ongoing contacts to relatives or peers are crucial (also Yates and Youniss 1998; McClurg 2003; Barber *et al*. 2009; Parsons 2015), but, in both respects, they may reproduce either practices and norms of civic and conventional participation or collective forms of civic inactivity and political evasion. This insight is important to understand the limits of political empowerment. Attempts aiming to increase the level of political activity in private and public matters should contemplate the social structures (social conditions, informal networks, group norms etc.) into which unemployed individuals are integrated and which have the tendency to reproduce established patterns of political behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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Annex 1– Table of sociodemographic traits of respondents

Germany					*Sweden*				
Name	*Age*	*Educ*	*Migr*	*Pol type**	*Name*	*Age*	*Educ*	*Migr*	*Pol type**
Mary	31	5	My	Evader	Emma	21	4	Mn	Evader
Kerstin	34	1	Mn	Evader	Linda	25	4	Mn	Evader
Selina	24	3	My	Evader	Magnus	20	3	Mn	Evader
Janine	23	1	Mn	Evader	Isak	21	4	Mn	Evader

Tessa	24	1	Mn	Evader	Viktor	34	4	Mn	Minimalist
Esma	23	3	My	Evader	Juan	33	5	My	Minimalist
Peter	21	2	Mn	Evader	William	26	5	My	Minimalist
Marvin	20	2	Mn	Evader	Joanna	26	5	My	Minimalist
David	24	4	Mn	Evader	Teresa	26	5	My	Minimalist
Halil	24	2	My	Evader	Lukas	30	4	My	Minimalist
Thomas	32	2	Mn	Minimalist	Camilla	34	5	Mn	Minimalist
Daniel	20	2	Mn	Minimalist	Fredrik	24	2	Mn	Minimalist
Hanna	25	3	Mn	Minimalist	Andreas	21	4	Mn	Minimalist
Wolfram	30	2	Mn	Minimalist	Lisa	30	5	My	Activist
Jens	28	2	Mn	Minimalist	Jacob	30	5	My	Activist
Dieter	28	3	Mn	Minimalist	Niklas	30	5	Mn	Activist
Nicole	30	4	My	Activist	Ilhan	29	2	My	Activist
Cansu	28	2	My	Activist	Joakim	32	4	Mn	Activist
Patrick	28	2	Mn	Activist					

- **Educ***: Educational level*: 1 = not completed primary school, 2 = primary school, 3 = lower level secondary education, 4 = upper level secondary education, 5 = lower level tertiary education;
- **Migr**: *Migration background*: My = migration background, Mn = no migration background
- **Pol type:** *Typology of political behaviour:* Evader = Evaders, Minimalist = Minimalist citizens, Activist = Activists against all odds

* Our respondents were assigned to one of the three groups according to their proximity to them. As for respondents with a migration background not entitled to vote (at regional or national level), they were assigned to the groups on the basis of their disposition to participate and/or their other political views and activities.

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