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## Waiting and temporal control: the temporal experience of long-term unemployment

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## **Waiting and temporal control: the temporal experience of long-term unemployment**

### **Abstract**

The paper analyses how long-term unemployed persons experience time during their unemployment trajectories. The paper uses a combination of interviewing and participant drawings to study the experience of time passing during the unemployment trajectory. We focus on the experience of wait time and find that the wait experience varies with control: some clients' experience temporal agency other a loss of control over time. When the wait time is characterised by uncertainty and a loss of control over time, it reinforces an experience of stagnation in the unemployment trajectory and a feeling of being a temporal outsider, living a life on hold, in comparison to societal norms of a working life. For these clients, wait time adds to the burden of unemployment. For clients experiencing temporal agency, wait time is experienced as meaningful, even useful. These clients experience control over the wait time or that the wait time has a fortunate timing in relation to other things happening in the clients' lives. Based on the analysis, temporal control is decisive for the long-term unemployed and therefore a focus on time is crucial in both research on social and employment services for vulnerable clients, and in the practice field.

### **Introduction**

Then I was...it took a year to get diagnosed because everything just takes a long time. Then I was... Oh I contacted them again, I had to add that to the story.... You know I have been through four different programs to test my work ability and some of them lasted nine months. Well six months, nine months (Dina,29).

The journey towards labour market participation for the vulnerable unemployed<sup>i</sup> with substantial problems besides unemployment is often 'long-term' (Employment Indicator Project [EIP], 2019; Jensen, 2015; Marston and McDonald, 2008) and in many cases a cause of frustration and uncertainty for the clients involved (Danneris, 2018; Rudman and Aldrich, 2016; Øian, 2004). An analysis of the current situation in Denmark shows that 63 per cent of the vulnerable unemployed have been out of work for 80 per cent of the time, looking back at the last five years (EIP 2019). These numbers mirror the general picture in many European countries, where long-term unemployment is strongly related to severe social and health problems (Berkel et al., 2017).

While extensive research has examined time in the healthcare services (e.g. Carr et al., 2014, Jónsdóttir and Baldursdóttir, 1998; Sjöling et al., 2004), only few studies have focused on time experience within the field of employment services (Danneris, 2016; Jensen, 2015; Marston and McDonald, 2008; Øian, 2004). Øian (2004) finds that young unemployed people often feel trapped

in an experience of a non-moving, empty time. Marston and McDonald (2008) point out that waiting time is related to the sense of autonomy and agency of the long-term unemployed. They find that clients of employment services frequently experience ‘wasting time’; especially clients who have been through various job training programmes with no tangible outcome (Marston and McDonald, 2008: 259–260). These findings suggest that the temporal experience is crucial for clients’ experience of long-term unemployment.

This study contributes to extant research on how time is experienced and managed when being subject to welfare policy. Vulnerable clients often face multiple disadvantages, including educational barriers, limited network and social resources, as well as a range of significant personal issues (Andersen et al., 2017). Therefore, clients are often simultaneously involved in employment services, healthcare and social services. Because these different systems are rarely coordinated and employment services depend on the work in other systems, vulnerable clients often face long and complicated processes with prominent wait time (Andersen et al., 2017; Danneris, 2018; Walker et al., 2016).

In this article, we focus on clients’ experiences of waiting. Our research question is: how can we understand clients’ time experience during their unemployment trajectories, and how can this contribute to qualifying practices in social and employment services? Since wait time is a dominant theme in the data, we focus on wait experience and investigate how clients experience—and cope with—wait time in the delivery of welfare services. Our thesis is that coping with wait time adds to the range of complex challenges that the vulnerable unemployed face and that social and employment services need to enable temporal control in order to empower clients.

## **Conceptual framework**

In order to understand the time experience of clients, we draw on conceptualizations of linear time and time of the mindful body (Fahlgren, 2009; see also Adam, 1995). Further, we draw on concepts of non-time (Bourdieu, 2000) and temporal agency (Flaherty, 2011) in order to understand how the experience of waiting is dependent on power and temporal control. The conceptual framework is outlined in the following.

### **Discourses of time**

Scholars have distinguished between linear objective time and rhythmic subjective time conceptualized as time of the mindful body (Fahlgren, 2009; see also Adam, 1995). In the western modernity, there is a strong discourse of linear time involving a vision of a predictable future. Social work takes place within arenas dominated by a discourse of linear time, and the legitimacy of social work is to bring about development towards what is considered normal (Fahlgren, 2009). However, subjective time is not always linear and oriented towards the future, it is a here and now presence that may drag or rush, and it depends upon context, social relations and interactions and embodiment.

Subjective time has been conceptualized as time of the mindful body. Social work based on the discourse of linear time is future oriented, seeking to bring about step-by-step development, whereas social work based on the discourse of the mindful body is oriented toward needs here and now (Fahlgren, 2009).

In the context of unemployment, Bourdieu (2000) describes another time experience, that is 'non-time', where nothing happens and there is nothing to expect. It differs from linear time as it involves no progression, no future, and it differs from the circularity, here-and-now attention, patience and involvement of the time of the mindful body. Bourdieu (2000: 222) describes it as “dead time, purposeless and meaningless” a time that is “annihilated”. Bourdieu argues that it is our investments in the world (*illusio*), that “make” time and often these involvements relate to employment. Bourdieu argues that without such involvements, people lose the expectation of a future implied by the present.

Fahlgren (2009) convincingly argues that the discourse of linear time can be invasive and that clashes between the discourse of the mindful body and the discourse of linear time lead to paradoxical and anxiety-producing situations (see also Juhila et al., 2015). This resonates well with research on the long-term unemployed, where Danneris (2016, 2018) followed 25 vulnerable cash benefit recipients through a two-year period and found that their trajectories are non-linear, consisting of changing periods of moving forward (progression), backward (deterioration), getting off track (derailment) or standing still (stagnation) (Danneris, 2018: 13). Hence, an expectation of step-by-step progression confronts non-linear trajectories.

However, based on Bourdieu, we might argue that linear time can also be a resource that lets you narrate a predictable and controllable future. The long-term unemployed with no social position from which to control and predict the future, awaiting the procedures and decisions of a complex and immense system of social security can become cut off from linear time, feeling left in non-time “in which nothing happens and where there is nothing to expect” (Bourdieu, 2000: 222). The long-term unemployed may lose access to the involvements that “make” time. Here, distress is not only driven by a clash between bodily rhythms in the here and now confronted with the planned, future-oriented linear time; distress is also produced by the sense of being in empty, meaningless non-time. A situation that may be exacerbated by being ‘out of sync’ with peers. The long-term unemployed may experience being a ‘temporal’ as well as a social outsider with regards to prevailing age norms (such as when to commence and complete education and when to hold a job) and this may aggravate the experience of life as standing still (Andersen and Bengtsson, 2019; Elder, 1994; Järvinen and Ravn, 2017; Mølholt, 2017).

Hence, in order to understand the different experiences of waiting time, we have to understand both the mindful body embedded in the here and now, the different investments in the world that the long-term unemployed have (or lack), and how the life course relates to prevailing age norms. However, it is also important to understand the scope for agency and how agency is temporal.

## **Temporal agency**

Flaherty (2011) asks how to account for variation in the perceived passage of time and points to attempts to control, manipulate or customize the time experience (see also Järvinen and Ravn, 2017). He conceptualizes the individual's attempts at controlling the passage of time as 'temporal agency' (Flaherty, 2003, 2011; see also Andersen and Bengtsson, 2019; Carr et al., 2014; Foster, 2019; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Järvinen and Ravn, 2017; Mølholt, 2017). We define temporal agency as the individual's participation and room for action linked to time and temporal orientations, that is the individual's ability to act temporarily (Mølholt, 2017: VI). Accordingly, temporal agency is bound to specific actions as well as temporal orientations. For example, the individual may strive to influence the timing or duration of events or the temporal experience so time feels short or long (Flaherty, 2003).

Several studies have found that waiting fosters uncertainty and anxiety (see Carr et al., 2014: 1674). However, agency in the sense of having control over the waiting time affects the experience of uncertainty and hence the experienced duration of waiting (Carr et al., 2014). Carr et al. (2014) found that patients waiting for surgery who experienced no control over their waiting time, for instance not knowing when the surgery will be scheduled, experienced time as dragging, while patients with greater control over their waiting time experienced the waiting time as passing quickly. Hence, the experience of waiting time also depends on temporal agency.

Auyero (2012) has described how political subordination is (re)produced by exposing the poor to waiting. He describes how waiting is normalized for the urban poor and suggests that waiting produces a submissive subjectivity. The forms of waiting described by Auyero are, however, distinctly different from what characterizes the context of the data in this article. In the following, we therefore briefly outline the temporality of the Danish employment services.

## **The time order of the Danish employment services**

Auyero (2012) describes clients in Argentina waiting in lines for benefits they cannot depend on, because payments are often denied or delayed and clients are subject to arbitrariness and uncertainty where rules and procedures are changed at random. In contrast, the long-term unemployed in a Danish context wait within a social security system. They are waiting at home while receiving benefits. However, the vulnerable unemployed face a specific time order that they must submit to, in order to obtain and remain on benefits.

The Danish labour market policies are characterised by welfare-to-work entailing that unemployment is targeted as the main issue also for clients facing social problems besides unemployment (e.g. mental health conditions, physical disabilities) (van Berkel et al., 2017). The active labour market policies (ALMP) in Denmark currently focus on activation through frequent meetings between caseworker and client and the use of work placements to develop and document the work abilities of the client. The municipalities providing employment services are governed through performance measurements emphasizing the timeliness of active measures, e.g. the frequency of meetings and participation in activation. Within this field, clients are considered in need of intervention in order to become active

(Wright, 2016). This conception of a passive client that should be made active by the system entails a discourse of linear time, involving future oriented planning and measures to step-by-step develop clients' labour market readiness. The Danish employment services then at times instil waiting (for documentation and clarification of the case), and at times rushes the unemployed to participate in active measures at very specific times and sanctioning noncompliance. In order to be eligible for flexible employment<sup>ii</sup> or disability pension a vast amount of documentation (and often years of participation in active labour market interventions) is needed in order to establish that the workability is permanently reduced and does not improve over time. Hence, the Danish employment services have a temporal order focussed on timeliness and step-wise improvement through activation. Despite the differences between Argentina and Denmark, the analysis shows that the experience of powerlessness, uncertainty and the arbitrariness of a system working according to its own incomprehensible logic, imposing a normalized temporal order on the unemployed has some similarities to that described by Auyero (2012).

## Data and methods

The data material derives from the LISES, a four-year ethnographic research project that took place between 2016 and 2020. The overall purpose of LISES was to investigate the delivery of welfare services to vulnerable unemployed in Danish municipalities and the scope for client participation. This article is based on interviews with 12 former cash benefit recipients who have gained employment after several years of effort. To recruit participants, we used caseworkers as gatekeepers. This was mainly a pragmatic choice as we were able to use our contacts to municipal caseworkers from LISES. We asked caseworkers to identify former clients who had gained employment. Some caseworkers found it easy to identify these former clients, other caseworkers did not know what happened to their clients once the client-caseworker relationship ended due to the division of labour of employment services in small teams with a narrow tasks. Hence, the selection of clients reflects teams where caseworkers were able to keep in touch with clients for a longer run. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

*Table 1 Overview of participants*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of unemployment (cash benefit)</b>
Camilla	28	Female	7
Ane	27	Female	3
Kristin	29	Female	7
Mia	28	Female	4
Lisbeth	51	Female	10
Hanna	53	Female	3
Steffan	26	Male	5
Gitte	41	Female	7
Ellen	37	Female	9
Viggo	29	Male	5

Dina	33	Female	8
Anders	42	Male	7

The place of the interview was chosen by the participant and in most cases we met in the participant's home. One interview took place at a public library, one at the participant's workplace and one at a jobcentre. The interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours. All participants have given consent to participate in the study, and the data collection and analysis has followed national and university guidelines on ethics and data protection. All participants are given pseudonyms and identifying information has been masked to ensure confidentiality.

The interviews were inspired by the short narrative approach, as it has been developed by Olesen and Eskelinen (2011) which draws attention to the often unnoticed everyday stories. The aim of the interviews was to achieve an in-depth knowledge of time as experienced by the participants. We focused on getting rich descriptions of the experience of the unemployment trajectory. Hence, the interview guide contained open questions about what happened during the unemployment trajectory, and finished with a drawing exercise.

In the drawing exercise, we asked participants to draw a timeline illustrating their unemployment trajectory, in which the horizontal axis was time passing, and the vertical axis their memory of whether the periods were experienced as 'up or down', or perhaps both. The instructions to participants were intentionally very general (Gramling and Carr, 2004). The drawings were used to obtain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the trajectories from the participants' point of view (Gramling and Carr, 2004). As commented by Literat (2013), an analysis of visuals has the potential to reveal a more nuanced depiction of concepts, emotions and information in an expressive and personally relevant manner. Further, the drawing exercise was used to facilitate participants' recollection and reflection (Berends, 2011; Kolar et al., 2015; Literat, 2013; Margolis and Zunjarwad, 2018), and to place unemployment in the context of other life events (Berends, 2011). We used the drawings interactively to open up a conversation with participants regarding their experience of time, using the timeline as a "visual middle ground between interviewer and participant" (Kolar et al., 2015: 28) informing interview questions.

The timelines were analysed by first focusing on each participant's trajectory looking at both content and form: taking note of the shape of the timeline, the specific events, the sequence of events and turning points depicted (Kolar et al., 2015). Afterwards, the trajectories were compared looking for similarities and differences in the trajectories (Gramling and Carr, 2004). The timelines are not directly comparable, because it varies how the participants interpreted their 'ups and downs', however all participants defined the vertical axis as their memory of the periods as more positive or negative. Some of the participants focused on the social and employment services, while others created a broader biographical narrative, illustrating life events, such as moving to a new city or beginning or ending a relationship. The drawings were particularly useful in the early analysis in the pursuit of emergent themes (Margolis and Zunjarwad, 2018).

The interviews are retrospective, since the interviewees are asked to look back at their former situation as unemployed. People interpret their past in order to make sense of their present (Mead, 1932) and

therefore, the participants' experiences with social and employment services must be understood in the light of their situation as employed. The retrospective narratives provide us with rich descriptions of the transition to work. We expected to find narratives of challenges being overcome ending with success. However, as we return to in the analysis, participants were reluctant to interpret their trajectory as a story of success.

Asking participants who are employed to looking back at their past unemployment trajectory allows us to understand how participants ascribe meaning to the entire unemployment trajectory, rather than the moment-by-moment flow of events as they unfold. The participants' current situation as employed provides a contrast, bringing forth aspects of experience that have changed due to their employment, thereby taking the experience of unemployment out of the everyday taken for grantedness of being unemployed. This provides a unique point of view on the time experience of the vulnerable unemployed. Since the participants have left unemployment, their time experience might represent a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) in understanding how temporal agency is constituted even for people in very vulnerable positions.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed ad verbatim. Analysis has been done on the original Danish transcripts and the quotes included in the article have been translated to English by the authors.

### **Analytical strategy**

Our analytical strategy is divided in three main phases (see Saldaña, 2012). The first begins with an open coding process inspired by Grounded Theory (GT) with the purpose of discovering themes in the raw data (Charmaz, 2006). Here, we coded all smaller sequences in the transcripts using participants' own words and expressions. Simultaneously, we worked with the drawings, examining patterns in the shape and content of the timelines. In the second phase, we used the GT technique of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006) to compare, explore and explicate the emergent patterns in the narratives before a more focused analysis. We noticed how some participants used expressions as 'calm periods' or periods at home as 'much needed rest' in contrast to other participants who described frustrating wait periods 'when nothing happened'. We found that the contradiction between these two experiences of time at home with relatively low activity in the social and employment program was interesting. Following this theme, we re-coded the data focused on 'waiting time' and participants' descriptions of primarily being at home and having no or low activity in the social and employment program. In the third phase, we used memo writing again, this time with a focus on combining data with theory. We used the concepts of temporal agency (Flaherty, 2003), linear time and time of the mindful body (Fahlgren, 2009) and non-time (Bourdieu, 2000) to focus our analysis. We identified wait experience characterised by a sense of control/agency and wait experience characterised by a lack of control/agency. The first referred to narratives about waiting periods that were somehow useful, wanted or even chosen. The latter referred to narratives about waiting periods that were described as frustrating, unwanted and meaningless. These two forms of waiting experience then structured the analysis. In the following, we present our findings. The first section focuses on the participants' drawings and has a more



exploratory character. In the following sections, we analyse the two variations of wait experience that we find in the narratives.

## Findings

### Unemployment trajectories through time

When studying the drawings, we found two dominant characteristics: the participants either drew a linear curve, perhaps with some bumps on the way, or a wave going up and down. As for the former, the participants in these cases illustrated a steep progression towards the point when their employment was settled, either because they were approved for flexible employment (flex-job), or they got an ordinary job or started education. This trajectory was especially the case for Dina, Gitte, Steffan, Viggo and Kristin. As an example, Kristin's drawing (Picture 1) appears below. As shown, she has drawn both a line with a clear progression and a curve with ups and downs, but with a clear linear progression.



Picture 1

Kristin has been unemployed for more than seven years, and she has suffered from anorexia, paranoid schizophrenia and has had several years of hospitalisations, as well as admissions to protected residences. At the time of the interview, she has a flexible job where she works 20 hours/week in a

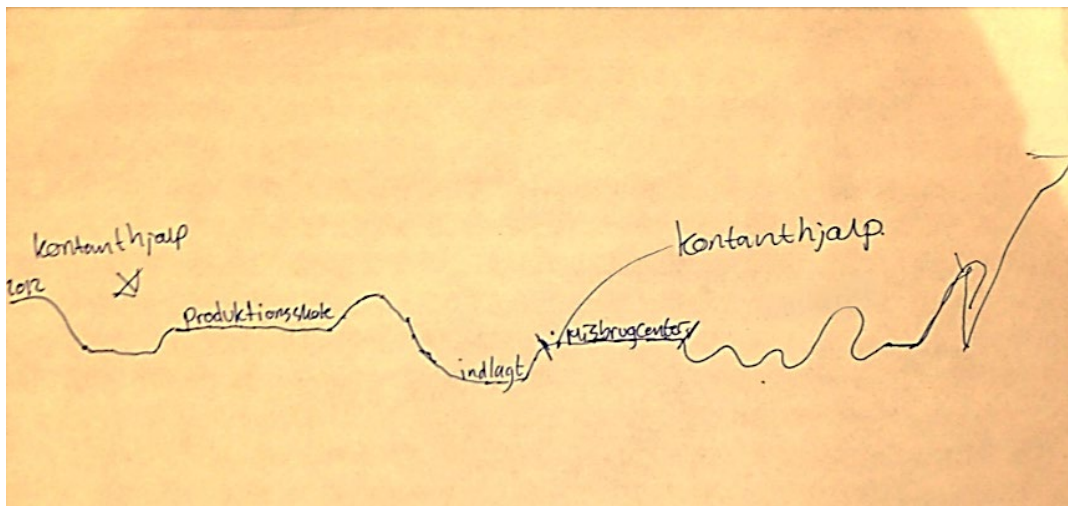
café. One of the dominant narratives in the interview with Kristin is the good relation to and support from her latest caseworker and mentor. As she is drawing, she is ambivalent as to how to illustrate a period that, on the one hand, has been a progression towards a flexible job and, on the other hand, a process with many challenges. When the interviewer asks about the waves, Kristin refers to the experience of the many different work placements. Later in the interview, she says:

Well, I made it, but only just. It is very hopeless. And when you stand there and must go through all these periods with work placements and all those things ... It can be very difficult because it's a very long process, you see. And you know, it's not before the end that you see the carrot you have been like fighting for. And it is difficult to hold on. And that's why it's so important to have persons holding on. If you don't have those people in your life then it's very hopeless. (Kristin, 29)

Kristin is stressing the fact that it was not until the end of her unemployment period that she was able to sense the direction of the employment measures. Hence, the linear curve of progression is the experience of linear time looking back from a successful outcome, while the bumps seem to reflect her subjective rhythmic time of the mindful body during the process in the here and now. The linear narrative of step-wise progression is not available to her until she has successfully left unemployment. Looking back, she remembers her unemployment trajectory as a long process and she emphasises perseverance and support from her network as essential to fight hopelessness. She has had difficulty coping with the long periods with varying interventions. This resembles how several of the other participants (in particular Dina and Lisbeth) describe periods where they were disillusioned about the process, and how it has challenged them to keep struggling during the extended period of unemployment. It is possible that the steep hill towards the end reflects a more general time experience of the unemployment trajectory: that the 'long run' is a tough one to endure.

During data collection, it was striking how several of the participants objected to a narrative about themselves as a 'positive story'. Even though the participants were employed at the time of the interview, they still wished to underline how they experienced a long and difficult process. The participants have experienced time and duration as a challenging factor during the unemployment trajectory. These findings support the view of the long-term unemployed as a group in the welfare state that waits more than others, in the words of Foster (2019). Furthermore, it has been a challenge for participants to continue to construct the participation in social and employment services as meaningful, especially when participating in many different activation measures.

The second type of drawings of a timeline resemble a wave going up and down. This is especially clear in the drawings of Mia, Viggo, Lisbeth, Camilla and Anders. Mia's drawing appears below (Picture 2).



Picture 2

The timeline going up and down resembles the empirical findings in the analysis of Danneris (2016): the employment trajectory is not a linear process; instead, it is characterised by changing periods of stagnation and progression. Mia is 28 years old and has been in and out of schools and social services for most of her youth. As she draws, she describes the various periods and events that make her experience of time passing positive or negative. Interestingly, Mia has also let her line flatten out sometimes. In the interview, she talks about one of the periods with a flat line, followed by a time illustrated as turbulent waves. During this period, she explains how she is mostly at home, out of school and employment, but also attending a programme to gain control over her use of hash. Above the flat line she writes the words ‘abuse treatment centre’ (‘Misbrugscenter’ in Danish) and says:

And you see, then I say to that lady [at the abuse treatment centre] that I need to have a job that will make me tired, where I can make myself tired ... because it’s no good that I smoke so much hash when I’m not doing anything ... And then I got an interview at [company where she is now employed] and one week after that I started in a work placement. (Mia, 28)

The quote above indicates how Mia copes with the time when she is at home. Time with generally low activity is problematic for her. She talks about a need to get busy with physical work that will make her tired and thus help her to control her use of hash. A dominant theme in the interviews is periods when the participants are primarily at home and when the activity level seems to be low. The flat line may resemble the non-time described by Bourdieu (2000), empty time without involvements in the world.

After the flat line, a period with much turbulence begins for Mia, characterised by new activity. Considering the perspective of temporal agency, as presented in the works of Flaherty (2011), Carr et al. (2014) and Foster (2019), it appears that wait time, or a sense of standing still, is linked with agency. It seems that Mia’s experience of time passing—going from a flat line to a turbulent period with ups and downs—is influenced by an impulse to move away from a period when nothing seems to happen, and Mia has a drive to control her time with busyness.

Overall, we find that the participants' drawings, supported by the narratives, open up an understanding of how time is something to deal with while being long-term unemployed. The vulnerable unemployed indeed wait more than others. This finding indicates the importance of taking time seriously in the practice field of social and employment services, as waiting can add to the pressure of enduring unemployment. The participants' time experience varies during the unemployment trajectory, however, wait experience is a dominant theme. In the following section, we will further investigate wait narratives.

### **Waiting as uncertainty or rest?**

In this section, we focus on two dominant patterns in the wait narratives, and the subsections are structured around these. The first part focuses on wait time characterised by uncertainty and a frustrating experience of time that stands still. The second part focuses on wait time described in a more positive manner as 'much needed rest'.

Wait time appears in the data as periods characterised by a low activity level in the employment and social services and where participants are primarily at home. However, wait time also appears in a more abstract manner as 'waiting in life', or the sense of living a life on hold. This form of wait experience is related to societal norms about where you should be in your life at a certain time in life, not least in terms of education and career (Elder, 1994). Hence, in the following we discuss two forms of wait experience: one more concrete that relates to time passing, and the other more abstract related to waiting in life.

### **Wait time: Non-time**

We categorise narratives about 'wasted time', 'standing still', unwanted or dull time at home waiting for something to happen, stagnation and a time that seems to drag as non-time. These stories are especially dominant in the cases of Dina, Gitte and to a certain degree Ellen. They describe long periods during their social and employment programmes without being in contact with their caseworker or the jobcentre.

The feeling of uncertainty is a recurrent theme in the participants' narratives about wait experience characterised as unwanted stagnation. Ellen answers a direct question of whether the last period before her flexible employment was approved, felt like time standing still: 'Yes, more or less. When you just ask where am I going? Do I end somewhere else or do I need to go somewhere else?' (Ellen, 37). The participant wants to be able to construct a predictable future, but lacks the temporal control to do so. Similar to other participants in the data, she remembers the uncertainty as a row of unanswered questions. Kristin is ambivalent when she looks back at her unemployment trajectory. Even though she stresses that she has been satisfied with the support from her caseworker, she describes that it was difficult to handle the wait time between the different activities and job placements. Kristin describes the last wait period as almost unbearable. During this period, she finishes her last work placement and waits for clarification of her job situation, which is to be decided on a rehabilitation team meeting<sup>iii</sup>. She says:

Then a really long time passed when I wasn't told anything and that is very frustrating. I finished [work placement] just before the summer holidays last year and I knew nothing. It

was a complete standstill and I wasn't going to the meeting [with the rehabilitation team] before ... it was in August ... I think when you start to have hope about it all, but that long period with uncertainty and what is going to happen? They told me nothing and it was the summer holidays and it was tough. (Kristin, 29)

Kristin expresses how the last period in her unemployment trajectory is characterised by uncertainty that is very frustrating. After her work placement has ended, Kristin is at home waiting over the summer. Kristin knows that she is supposed to participate in a rehabilitation team meeting after the holidays and get her final assessment, but at the time she does not know exactly when. Kristin seeks information from her caseworker concerning the final date for the meeting, but nobody can give her answers and this leaves her waiting within an uncertain time frame.

Several of the participants have tried to change a situation of uncertainty, for instance by repeated calls to a caseworker (Steffan), writing emails to managers (Viggo) or even contacting the Mayor (Dina). This supports the findings of Danneris (2016): the experience of stagnation is characterized by uncertainty, in the sense that the participants find themselves in the hands of an opaque system that leaves them paralysed and unable to change the unwanted situation (see also Danneris, 2018: 11). As Bourdieu (2000) has commented, waiting is related to power, and those in need are subjected to the will of others by being subjected to waiting (see also Foster, 2019; Gasparini, 1995). Lack of temporal control exacerbates the powerlessness experienced by participants (Auyero, 2012; Bourdieu, 2000). As in the case of Kristin, the participants sometimes try to act on their own when they experience stagnation, but with the result of finding themselves being put on hold and with nothing left to do other than sit back on the couch and wait (Danneris, 2018: 13). This underscores the connection between agency and temporal experience described by Carr et al. (2014): 'Time drags with lack of agency' (Carr et al., 2014: 1677). Carr et al. conclude that when patients do not experience any space for action during the wait time, it causes a feeling of no control, which again reinforces the experiences of wait time (Carr et al., 2014). In light of this, the narratives about frustrating wait periods during the unemployment trajectories seem to be influenced by a lack of agency, characterised by little or no control, waiting for the next step in the programme. Besides features of uncertainty, and a loss of control, we also find a theme of uncertainty related to the time 'when life can start again'.

When Gitte is asked what she wishes could have been different, she highlights a better insight in psychical conditions from her caseworkers and says: 'Well, that whole human insight, and then make a plan. Not just, see you in three months, see you in three months' (Gitte, 41). Her experience is that caseworkers do not know what to do with her, and it seems clear that Gitte regards time between the follow up meetings and lack of profession as a negative factor. In a similar way Dina says:

I have attended ... what? four different job training programmes and some have lasted nine months. Well, six months, nine months ... like out of sight, out of mind, right? Oh, and then I stayed home for a year without being able to get through to any caseworker. (Dina, 33)

Looking more deeply into Dina's experiences of the jobcentre as absent, it appears that a dominant theme is a lack of follow-up, both during activation measures and the periods in between. Dina struggles with physical problems and awaits a job ability assessment. The postponement of this causes great frustration. What Ellen, Dina and Gitte (and to a certain degree Viggo and Anders) have in

common is the fact that their process has led to a flexible job because of a physical condition. They all regard their illness as a frustrating disturbance of a good working life. Gitte says: 'I have always loved working and attending school, I have good memories from back then, right? So, it's like, when I got ill, it just went downhill, right?' (Gitte, 41). Gitte remembers life as it was before, when she was happily employed until a period of illness started. Any pauses in the employment programme adds to the already long period before she can return to a life that is as close to 'normal' as possible, taking her illness into consideration. The narratives of wait time in the cases of Ellen, Dina and Gitte seem to be linked to a feeling of living a life on hold and a general loss of meaning in life. Bourdieu (2000) argues that our time experience depends on our engagements in the social world. When people lose their job, they lose access to social roles and activities and this leaves them with dead, meaningless time (Bourdieu 2000: 222). Hence, wait experience depends on meaningfulness (cf. Carr et al., 2014). Similarly, Danneris (2016) argues that meaning and coherence is crucial when it comes to the participants' experiences in their unemployment trajectories, including periods of stagnation. In the light of this finding, the lack of meaning is an important factor in the experience of wait time, as it is linked to narrations of time dragging and participation in various activation programmes as a waste of time, in comparison with life as it used to be.

Wait narratives are also centred around a comparison with studying or working peers. As Hanna puts it, she 'mirrors herself' when meeting her neighbour and is annoyed by the fact that she is 'just a benefit claimant'. Dina says:

So when I am in it, I think that something just has to happen. It cannot be right that I spend all my twenties just being at home. And all my girlfriends and friends, you see, they are far ahead and are in relationships and have children and all that. And I am just at home. (Dina, 33)

In the quote, Dina is reflecting on her frustration related to feeling stagnated by referring to events in her social network, such as starting a family. She indicates how being in her twenties and at home is a life that stands out in the sense that it is very different from those of her peers. When Hitlin and Elder (2007) add temporality to the concept of agency, they point out that people act based on temporal horizons. Elder (1994) formulated the term 'social timing' to express how the temporal experience is influenced by age-graded perspectives on social roles. Hence, the experience of uncertainty, meaninglessness and time as dragging are related to the remembrance of life before being unemployed as well as the feeling of being a temporal outsider, compared to societal norms of where you should be in your life at a certain time.

Through the conceptual framework on temporal agency (Flaherty, 2011; Hitlin and Elder, 2007) and non-time (Bourdieu 2000), this analysis reveals how lack of control over the wait time causes an experience of stagnation and time as dragging during the unemployment trajectories. The time experience of the long-term unemployed is influenced by temporal orientations, such as societal norms of where to be at a certain time in life. The wait periods add to an uncertain feeling and a loss of control over 'when life will begin' in comparison to working peers. The participants are left with little opportunity to act on their current situation.

## Meaningful wait time

It is important to underline that while the data contains multiple narratives that explicitly address experiences of wait time and descriptions of ‘long’ time when nothing seems to happen, there are a limited number of narratives of the wait time as ‘short’. However, there are several stories of wait time with a significant absence of a theme of stagnation, and these accounts are the focus in this section.

While the wait periods in the narratives of Gitte, Dina and Ellen cause an experience of stagnation and a feeling of time as dragging, similar periods in the cases of Steffan, Hanna, Camilla and Viggo are characterised as a time with ‘much needed rest’. Steffan describes a one-year period when he was ‘left in peace’ by the jobcentre, and he stresses how during this time he was able to ‘settle down’ until he was ready for something else to happen. Several times in her interview, Camilla mentions the importance of things happening ‘calmly’ or ‘nice and easy’. She explains it further:

Interviewer: well that thing about nice and easy, can you give an example of what that could be?

Camilla: For instance if I have had a bad period or need things to be calmer ... instead of [someone telling me] ‘now you are doing this and that, and this and that ... instead she [the caseworker] would say: ‘okay, well then, we will perhaps take things slow until you have a better period. (Camilla, 28)

Camilla is talking about periods in her unemployment trajectory where she is primarily at home. A recurrent theme in Camilla’s story is a personal learning process of her strengths and weaknesses, including how to balance the hours of activity, to maintain stable mental health and to fight social anxiety. As illustrated in the quote, Camilla emphasises how her caseworker has responded to her need for adjusting the activity level in the social and employment programme. In contrast to a feeling of being pushed too hard, she experiences having influence on the time at home and the time of activity. Camilla’s sense of control is linked to influence on the timing of activities. This resembles how Flaherty (2003) defines timing as a variation of ‘time work’ and an expression of how the individual can be a temporal agent, customising temporal experience.

Similarly, we find that in the positive narratives about waiting periods as calm periods at home there is an experience of control over the timing and duration of these periods. While the literature on client participation has emphasized client control over problem-definition and choice of measures (e.g. Borghi and van Berkel, 2007; Kely et al., 2015), our study suggests that the control over timing can in fact be a crucial dimension of participation when being a client subject to welfare policy. Especially in the context of ALMP focused on activation, timeliness and step-by-step progression, temporal agency may be an important but overlooked dimension of client participation.

Hanna’s case that we outline below is interesting, because the timing of wait periods not only relate to temporal control but also social timing. Hanna’s case is chosen as it illustrates a positive narrative of how the jobcentre ‘let her be’, respecting a need for peace and quiet. At the same time, it shows how the experience of wait time is influenced by its social timing. Like Camilla, Hanna emphasises how she was able to influence the timing of activity in the employment program as well as periods at home. However, she describes the timing through a more general reflection on the timing of her unemployment trajectory:

I am [at the time of the interview] at a time in my life when both my girls are out studying, and have left home. So, all the time is mine. So, it is perfect timing. [When I was] unemployed,

my girls – one of my girls – needed back-up in the two years when I was unemployed and the jobcentre had a good appreciation of that (Hanna, 53).

When Hanna talks about timing, she refers to the ability to take time to be with her daughter who struggled with mental illness through a long period some years back. For Hanna, periods where nothing seems to happen in her unemployment trajectory were not a problem, and as the quote indicates, this is related to an engagement in the lives of her children that provides her with a strong sense of meaning and shields her from the experience of non-time. Similar to Hanna, several of the other participants refer to ‘calm’ periods in their unemployment trajectory that had a good timing because their children were in need of care.

Hence, when we regard unemployed clients as temporal agents, it opens an understanding of how they cope with time during their employment trajectories, including periods characterised as wait time. In various ways, the participants' narratives show how they strive to control their long-term unemployment, and how control over timing influences the wait experience and may transform waiting from a frustrating uncertain wasted time to something meaningful and useful.

### **Concluding reflections on implications for practice**

The analysis of the clients' time experiences reveals significant patterns in clients' narration of themselves as either left to uncertainty or as subjects with temporal agency. Our findings first support existing knowledge of how time is indeed a factor that adds to the challenges vulnerable long-term unemployed people must cope with. In the analysis, we have focussed on the experience of wait time and we found considerable variation in the experience of wait time. While some clients found two months of wait time at home almost unbearable, others interpreted one-year of seeming standstill in positive terms as a ‘rest period’. These variations are influenced by control and agency over time as well as social timing and meaningfulness. Wait time in the social and employment programme can be positive for clients who either have strong investments in the social world that make them able to “make” time, or clients who have a sense of control concerning the duration of wait time. This contrasts with those clients waiting in frustrating uncertainty. The temporal aspect of agency is linked with orientation towards time horizons, including orientation towards cultural norms of where you should be in your life at a certain time.

These findings have implications for practice at the street level, where active labour market policies are put into practice in the daily encounters between clients and practitioners. First, these findings underline the importance of taking time seriously when working with the long-term unemployed. Time is a component that the clients must deal with in addition to other problems in their efforts towards gaining employment. Second, these findings indicate that it is possible to strengthen clients' agency through a focus on temporality. If time is directly addressed in the client-caseworker communication, the clients are provided with better options in terms of coping with time. For example, caseworkers can work on increasing the transparency of the process, informing the clients of the casework that is being done when nothing seemingly happens and when they can expect the case to move on. Furthermore, the caseworkers can support the clients' temporal agency by including them in decisions regarding the timing and duration of interventions in the employment services. Finally, it is important that caseworkers are aware of and take into account the differentiated



experience of waiting that relates to investments in social life, meaningfulness and social norms regarding the social timing of education and a career.

Danish employment services are increasingly emphasizing client agency and client participation. Our findings point towards temporal control as important for client participation, for instance via agency over timing of activity as well as wait periods. If employment services are to increase client agency, it is important that the organization of employment services is flexible enough to allow clients to have a larger degree of temporal control. The Danish employment services have been governed through a focus on the timeliness of interventions. The findings in this study indicate that an emphasis on timeliness is counterproductive for the trajectories of long-term unemployed clients.

Our study raises several new questions. More knowledge is needed about what circumstances affect wait experience and how the interplay between the social and employment services and events in the client's life may build or impair client agency. Scholars are increasingly challenging the notion of the passive welfare recipient and conceptualizing the ways in which clients are actively coping with their life circumstances (Lister, 2004; Wright, 2016; Hoggett, 2001). In order to further the understanding of the active welfare subject, future research needs to engage with how clients are temporal actors and how clients are able to leave "non-time" and gain temporal control.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the term vulnerable unemployed to refer to unemployed persons with problems besides unemployment. In the Danish employment services these clients are categorized as ”ready for activity” in contrast to being ”ready for employment” or ”ready for education”.

<sup>ii</sup> The term flexible employment (flex-job) is a category within Danish legislation. It is an agreement whereby the municipality makes a financial contribution that supplements the wage that is paid by the company. The former client works in a type of employment that is flexible in terms of working time and function, and thus is adjusted to enable the former client to work (Caswell, 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> A rehabilitation team is an inter-professional team situated in the Danish employment services. The team meets with clients and caseworkers to assess cases of unemployed clients with complex social problems. It is the rehabilitation team that decide on recommendations that can help clients into work or, when this is not a viable goal, they can recommend a permanent disability benefit (Dall and Caswell, 2018).