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Transnational Learning Processes: European and Nordic Experiences in the Employment Fieldⁱ

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Abstract: This paper analyses and compares the transnational learning processes in the employment field in the European Union and among the Nordic countries. Based theoretically on a social constructivist model of learning and methodologically on a questionnaire distributed to the relevant participants, a number of hypotheses concerning transnational learning processes are tested. The paper closes with a number of suggestions regarding an optimal institutional setting for facilitating transnational learning processes.

Key words: Transnational learning, Open Method of Coordination, Learning, Employment, European Employment Strategy, European Union, Nordic countries.

1. Introduction

The overall aim of this paper is to compare the learning processes that have characterized European and Nordic policy cooperation in the employment field. While Nordic experiences with transnational learning processes go back many years, they are relatively unknown to both the broader public and research communities. On the other hand, the European learning processes have been widely studied over the last 4-5 years.

The parallel learning processes at the European and Nordic levels in the employment field both take place in separate committees, and they are processes independent of one another, even though there are examples of personnel overlapping in one or two cases.ⁱⁱ At the same time, there are a number of differences, as European cooperation in the employment field is based upon the Treaty of the European Union with the Council of Ministers as a strong political actor. On the other hand, the Nordic cooperation in the employment field is more loosely organized, with the Nordic Council of Ministers as a much weaker political actor. As will be demonstrated, however, drawing comparisons between the Nordic transnational learning processes and the learning processes of the EU Member States – where transnational learning processes or the “mutual learning”ⁱⁱⁱ processes (as they were referred to at the Lisbon summit in 2000) are the *raison d’être* of the so-called Open Method of Coordination (OMC) – serves to highlight a number of advantages and disadvantages in both cases. This is due to the contrasting institutional arrangements surrounding the two ways of promoting transnational learning processes. Through the analysis of these contrasting institutional surroundings, it becomes possible to approach an explanation of what facilitates and what impairs transnational learning processes.

More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to address three questions concerning transnational or “mutual learning” processes in the EU and among the Nordic countries: first, what characterizes the mutual learning processes of the OMC in the EU employment field? Second, what characterizes transnational learning processes among the Nordic countries in their joint efforts concerning employment? Third, and most importantly, when comparing the experiences with learning processes in the EU and among the Nordic countries, what are the reasons for the apparent differences in how mutual or transnational learning processes are most efficiently diffused among a group of Member States?

However, a necessary point of departure for addressing these three questions is a concrete understanding of what actually constitutes learning. This question will therefore be dealt with in the following section.

This paper is structured as follows: section 2 contains an analysis of the discussion of analytical approaches to learning in recent literature and presents the model which will serve as the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis in this paper. Section 3 analyses European learning processes in the employment field, and, especially, the learning processes taking place in the European Employment Committee. In section 4, the Nordic learning processes in the employment field are analysed. Section 5 presents a comparison between the Nordic and the European experiences with the promotion of learning in the employment field. Section 6 is the conclusion.

2. What is Learning?

In recent years, the literature in the field of international relations on transnational learning or mutual learning has grown significantly. As pointed out by several scholars (e.g. Levy, 1994 and Flockhart, 2004), however, the field

represents a minefield of conceptual and methodological problems, as learning is difficult to define, isolate, measure and apply empirically.

In another paper (Nedergaard, 2005), I have argued in favour of a social constructivist approach in which learning is defined as “shifts or change in the language-constituted relations to one another.” This means that learning is when relevant actors accept or become convinced that new concepts or combinations of concepts are more suitable as descriptions of the social reality, e.g. when decision-makers accept that “early activation” is an instrumental concept for avoiding long-term unemployment, or when decision-makers accept that “increased labour supply” represents a challenge that will help remedy – not exacerbate – the problem of unemployment. According to the approach to learning presented above, learning is when people give meaning to the world through new concepts^{iv} based on their interactions with others. Hence, our understanding of the world is a continued social process of reproduction and negotiation, which is embedded in language. If this social constructivist definition of learning is accepted, there are several factors influencing the potential for learning.

First, a precondition for learning is contact to other people in some manner or another. At the same time, of course, the frequency of contacts is an important precondition for learning processes to take place. In the case of this paper, where the object of research is the working of a committee, a proxy for this precondition for learning might be the extent to which the committee meets on a regular basis and whether or not members participate in these meetings.

Moreover, for analytical purposes, factors that influence the potential for learning understood as language-constituted changes due to harmonization through the acceptance of new shared concepts can be organized along two different dimensions, i.e. as factors that are internal and external to the committee.

External processes can create conditions that facilitate either the harmonization or fragmentation of concepts, thereby either supporting or limiting the potential for learning. By harmonization of new concepts, I mean that new concepts are accepted as suitable descriptions of the social world, e.g. in the employment field. On the other hand, the flipside of the harmonization coin is fragmentation, meaning that there are no broadly accepted concepts as descriptions of the social world in a given social context, e.g. a committee on employment policy. Firstly, actors in the external environment may restrict or expand the room for manoeuvre available to the members of a committee. If the external environment constrains the scope for “conceptual manoeuvring” for the committee members (e.g. by imposing narrow political mandates), then the fragmented positions within the organization are sustained, professional knowledge consisting of new concepts is not diffused, and, hence, the potential for learning is impaired. By contrast, if the actors in the external environment allow a larger scope for “conceptual manoeuvring”, learning processes may be facilitated (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953: § 143). I propose that the proxies of the room for manoeuvre are, on the one hand, the degree of “up-stream” fragmentation, i.e. the degree to which the committee in question is obliged to prepare meetings at the political level and, therefore, is forced to allow the discussion to rely heavily on political mandates; on the other hand, the degree of “down-stream” fragmentation, i.e. the degree of detailed interest expressed by the relevant politicians in the work carried out by the committee.

As explained by mainstream organization theory, another condition that may facilitate learning is the degree of uncertainty surrounding a committee (Mintzberg, 1979). If the level of uncertainty is great, learning can be expected to be facilitated, as the actors in the committee will be less confident in their previous standard operating procedures and more susceptible to new solutions to their problems (cf. Simon in Nedergaard, 2001: 65). Conversely, if the level of uncertainty is low, learning processes will be impaired, as members will be satisfied with their already existing knowledge. A proxy for the level of uncertainty is the existence or absence of political failure as it could be argued that political failure, more than anything else, is what renders actors susceptible to innovative solutions. Additionally, in the particular case of European and Nordic cooperation in the employment field, political failure is tantamount to the (perception of the) unemployment rate. In other words, learning is more likely when facing a high unemployment rate.

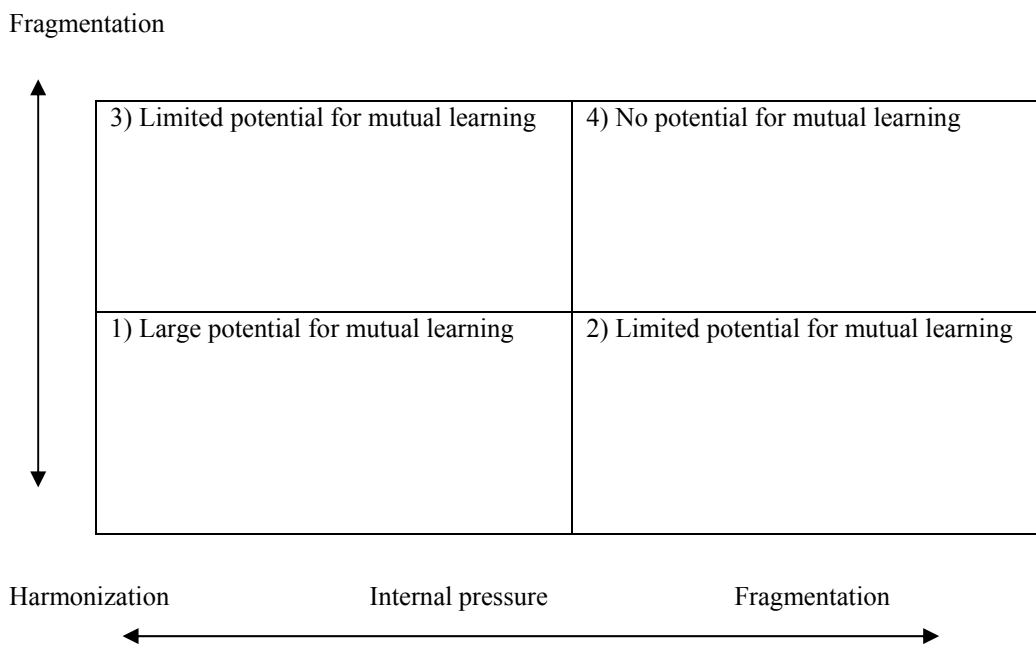
However, processes internal to the committee may also support or impair learning processes.^v For example, the existence of a common set of accepted concepts among the members of the committee implies that the members will be able to relate to one another's knowledge of already existing concepts (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953: § 570). Of course, the harmonization of concepts only involves learning if and when this harmonization results from open and free "argumentative competition" based upon good and bad domestic practices, as opposed to harmonization due to a political dictate. In reality, argumentation in most committees is a combination of both, however, at varying degrees leaving open a differing scope for "conceptual manoeuvring". A proxy for harmonization (or lack thereof) in the use of concepts in a committee may be a common professional background (or lack thereof) for the members of the organization. At the same time, officials participating in international cooperation at the generalist level normally have an academic background in the social sciences (though, of course, this background can be varied). Therefore, this proxy might not be of any great value in order to test differences as far as learning is concerned unless this hard data is combined with detailed interviews.

Another possible condition for facilitating learning inside a committee is having an authoritative persuader within the committee (authority is possibly used here as a hybrid of Weber's bureaucratic authority and charismatic authority). Authority based on professional knowledge and a refined and broadly accepted set of concepts might support learning, as other members will be more susceptible to the concepts in arguments made by actors with this kind of authority. A proxy for the degree of authority a member of an organization may possess is the length of his or her membership in the committee or any other extraordinary social or professional attributes such as being recognized for possessing analytical knowledge considerably above normal. However, a problem with this proxy is that it might require a detailed study to discern who is an authoritative persuader in a committee and what influence he or she actually has.

The figure below contains a model that presents the potential for learning as determined by external and internal processes in which learning is conceptualised negatively in terms of the fragmentation of concepts (i.e. there are no broadly accepted concepts as descriptions of the social world in a given social context) and positively in terms of the harmonization of concepts (i.e. new concepts are accepted as suitable descriptions of the social world) or, in other words, as changes in language-constituted relations to other actors.

It is important not to mix the internal and external analytical perspectives on what facilitates or constrains learning. Each of these two aspects may work as a constraining factor on the overall learning in a committee. For instance, the extent of learning in a committee with both an authoritative persuader and members with a common professional background may remain quite limited by factors such as narrow political mandates and detailed political interest in what is transpiring within the committee. Consequently, the analytical division between internal and external factors is essential for making correct prescriptions as to what may maximize learning procedures in committees.

Figure: Model for analysing the potential for learning



The model above presents the dynamics of mutual learning as a result of internal and external constraints for the harmonization or fragmentation of concepts. In short, internal constraints facilitating learning include participants with a common professional background; having an authoritative persuader in the group; and a high frequency of meetings. External pressures facilitating learning are insulation from the political level and the perception of political failure. In the model above, the first quadrant represents a large learning potential (i.e. a potential for harmonization of concepts), whereas the second and third quadrants represent limited potentials for learning, and the fourth quadrant indicates that learning is impossible. Naturally, the movements between the four squares in the model may be interpreted as a continuum.

Based on the model for analysing the potential for learning, five hypotheses concerning possible independent variables in the learning processes of the European cooperation and Nordic cooperation in the employment field can be established.

This paper seeks to analyse these five hypotheses on the basis of qualitative analysis and quantitative data accumulated via a questionnaire distributed to members of the European Employment Committee (in short EMCO) and the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour Market and Working Environment Policy (the so-called EKA).

A working hypothesis can be derived at the empirical level from each of the theoretical determinants of learning:

Hypothesis 1): learning is more likely when a group meets repeatedly

Working hypothesis: More meetings lead to higher scores on the learning index.

Data and test: Independent variable: times respondents have attended meetings and frequency.
Dependent variable: composite learning index.

Hypothesis 2): learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure

Working hypothesis: The perceived interest of the minister and state secretary is inversely proportionate to the score on the learning index.

Data and test: Independent variables:
a) The degree to which the agenda is governed by the ministerial meetings or not.
b) Perceived interest from minister and state secretary.
Dependent variable: composite learning index.

Hypothesis 3): learning is more likely when a group member is confronted by clear evidence of political failure.

Working hypothesis: Higher than average unemployment causes respondents to be more susceptible to learning and thus increases their ranking on the learning index.

Data and test: Independent variable: unemployment rate in country of respondent compared to average.

Dependent variable: composite learning index.

Hypothesis 4): learning is more likely in groups in which individuals share a common professional background.

Working hypothesis:

A higher proportion of the group sharing the same professional background results in a higher score on the learning index.

Data and test:

Independent variable: share of the participants with same background.

Dependent variable: composite learning index.

Hypothesis 5): learning is more likely when an authoritative member is the persuader.

Working hypothesis:

Having an active senior participant in the group increases the score on learning index.

Data and test:

Independent variable: number of active senior participants in the group.

Dependent variable: composite learning index.

The testing of the five hypotheses is based upon both qualitative and (where possible) quantitative data. The dependent variable in all five instances is a composite learning index that will be established in order to compare the learning processes among the EU Member States as well as among the Nordic countries.

3. Data on European Learning Processes in the Employment Field

Basically, the European Employment Strategy (EES) adheres to the following sequence: guidelines – indicators – national plans – evaluation – peer reviews. At the end of “the EES year”, the Commission and the Council conclude on which problems Member States are not addressing and issue recommendations for policy reform. The cornerstone of the organization of the EU European Employment Strategy is the Employment Committee (EMCO), which is the committee that coordinates and discusses all elements of the EES.

Since the construction of the EES processes, there has been continuous debate concerning their effect and impact. In 2002, the Commission conducted a comprehensive review of the first five years of EES operations. This report was positive, concluding that, “there had been significant changes in national employment policies,” and that, “the Strategy has brought a shift in national policy formulation and focus – away from managing unemployment, towards managing

employment growth” (Commission, 2002). Among EES scholars, Kerstin Jacobsson (2003) has also pointed out a number of positive effects of the EES. She concludes that the most important effect thus far has been that it has fostered “a cognitive consensus” around common challenges, objectives, and policy approaches. At a more general level, Borrás & Jacobsson (2004) have argued on “policy learning” that “the development of common discourses, establishing certain key concepts as well as policy principles and understanding of causal linkages, has been instrumental in the development of the new policy co-ordination processes.” Other scholars, however, have been much more critical about the evaluation of the EES; it appears as though “there is no academic consensus yet either on whether the strategy works or – if it does – how it brings about change” (Trubek & Trubek, 2003: 13).

At the end of 2003, an investigation took place concerning, among other things, the learning effects of the EES. The basis for this investigation was a questionnaire distributed to all of the EMCO members (Ørnsholt & Vestergaard, 2003). The members – and the social partners – were asked about the learning effects at the national level resulting from the EES.

On the basis of the response from 21 of a total of 41 EMCO members, a composite learning index was constructed. The composite learning index consists of three different indicators based on questions regarding how often respondents have learned something new from the European cooperation in the employment field; how often they have reconsidered or changed their preferences as a result of ideas, knowledge or documentation obtained at the meetings; and how often ideas and experiences from other EU Member States have made a strong impression on them.

The exact wording of the three questions is the following:

- 1) “How often have you or your national colleagues learned anything new from the Open Method of Coordination, about which methods and policies are the best in dealing with employment policies?”
- 2) “How often have ideas and experiences from other member states made a strong impression on you or your national colleagues?”
- 3) “How often have ideas, knowledge, and documentation from the Open Method of Coordination made you or your national colleagues reconsider or change your preferences concerning the choice of employment policies in your country?”

Participants could rate their response from “Very often” (= 5 points) to “Never” (= 1 point^{vi}) or “Don’t know” (= 6, subsequently eliminated), and as all three indicators contain variables designating the same scale, the learning index can be constructed by simple addition, thereby creating an index with a minimum value of 3 points (no learning) and a maximum value of 15 points (maximal learning).

However, the tests of partial correlations between the three indicators do raise some preliminary questions. In order to ensure that the index indicators are in fact measuring the same dimension without being redundant, partial correlations ought to have a gamma-value^{vii} between 0.3 and 0.8.

This holds for the relationship between the questions concerning “New knowledge” (question 1 above) and “Preferences” (question 3 above), and between the questions concerning “Strong impression” (question 2 above) and “New knowledge” with gamma-correlations of 0.844 and 0.538, respectively. However, the partial correlation for the questions concerning “Strong impression” and “Preferences” is much weaker, the gamma value being 0.262, indicating that they are not measuring quite the same thing.^{viii}

The wording of the question could be a probable cause, as “Strong impression” could imply both negative and positive impressions. Moreover, while positive strong impressions can be regarded as indicative of learning, the opposite might be true of negative impressions, because they entail the harmonization of fewer concepts.

As I have argued elsewhere (Nedergaard, 2005), a methodology using questionnaires might generally underestimate the potential learning effects stemming from the EES. Instead, a methodology based on a social constructivist approach to learning would have analysed the main discourses in the employment field in the various Member States, the rise in and hegemony of new concepts in the policy debate etc. On the other hand, the primary aim in this paper is to analyse the learning processes among the EU Member States compared to the learning processes among the Nordic countries. In other words, I am looking for differences between the international institutional arrangements as far as learning processes are concerned and how these differences might influence the learning processes, where learning processes are mainly understood as possibilities for harmonization to take place in the EMCO. Hence, it is of no importance whether or not the methodology used underestimates learning effects, because I assume that the underestimations in the EU and the Nordic countries are of similar size.

The 21 respondents from EMCO who had answered all of the questions regarding learning in Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003) had a group mean of 9.3 on the learning index, with the minimum score being six and the maximum score being 12. As mentioned above, the full possible range on the composite learning index is from a value of three to a value of 15. In this paper, I suppose that what is meant by transnational or mutual learning processes is, in fact, that all participating countries stand to learn from participating in the work of the same committee. This does not mean that all countries have learned the same and that all countries have learned to the same extent. In order to test the hypothesis in the rest of this section, the differences in the position of the countries on the composite learning index becomes important.

Therefore, based on the composite learning index above and as a necessary digression of the overall argumentation, it can be concluded that learning effects in Denmark and the Netherlands could be judged to be small. As far as Belgium, the UK, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria are concerned, the EMCO members experienced moderate learning effects. A third group of Member States were France, Finland and Sweden, where the EMCO members had experienced relatively high learning effects according to the questionnaire responses, cf. the table below.

Table: Composite Learning Index for EMCO Member States

Member State	Composite learning index
Sweden	12
France	10.5
Finland	10.5
UK	10
Germany	10
Belgium	10
Italy	9.5
Ireland	9
Greece	9
Spain	9
Austria	9
Denmark	8
Netherlands	7

Source: Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003).

After this digression, I will now return to the main line of argumentation in this paper. As a result of the model of learning (or lack of learning) presented earlier in this paper, five hypotheses were presented as explanations of the learning processes taking place. In the rest of this section, these hypotheses are considered in turn based on the qualitative and quantitative data:

Re hypothesis 1): learning is more likely when a group meets repeatedly.

The EMCO meets repeatedly and normally four times annually for a one-day meeting in Brussels. The precondition for learning, namely that the group meets repeatedly, is, therefore, fulfilled. Under the EMCO, an Indicator Group and a so-called Re Hoc Committee are established. The work of these groups, however, is closely connected to the work in the EMCO; their tasks are merely to support and prepare the EMCO work.

Upon reviewing the results of the questionnaire, it became apparent that this measure was somewhat skewed, as most of the respondents had participated in more than five meetings, earning them a maximal score of 4 (scores ranging from 1 for 0 meetings to 4 for 5+ meetings). A gamma test did reveal a moderate positive correlation of 0.541 between the number of attended meetings and the score on the learning index; however, this correlation was not significant, as the p value was higher than 0.05, at 0.124.

On the other hand, simply comparing means may provide an impression of data: respondents who had attended one or two meetings had a learning index mean of 8.33 (n=3), whereas the respondents who had attended three or four meetings had a learning index score of six (probably an outlier), and the large group of respondents who had attended more than five meetings had a mean score on the learning index of 9.64 (n=17). This is an (admittedly impressionistic) indication that having attended more meetings may increase the respondents' score on the learning index.

Concerning Hypothesis 1, I conclude that it has been confirmed.

Re hypothesis 2): learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure.

The EMCO meetings are closely linked to the preparation of the meetings in the Council of Ministers. They are therefore normally held roughly a fortnight prior to these meetings. In other words, the EMCO agenda is almost completely governed by the political agenda of the ministers.

All of the points on the agenda of the Council of the Ministers pertaining to employment and dealing with questions under the Open Method of Coordination are discussed by the EMCO, which also issues notes to the ministers accounting for its opinions; these opinions are generally endorsed by the Council of Ministers. This ministerial endorsement hardly comes as a surprise, however, as they are usually briefed prior to the Council meetings by the very same civil servants who have taken part in the EMCO meetings. The actual negotiations in the EMCO are also highly politicised. Most EMCO members either negotiate based on a "soft mandate" (= the member negotiates in the "spirit" of the minister) or a "hard" mandate (= the member negotiates on the basis of instructions accepted by the minister). The so-called EMCO support team normally produces the documents discussed at the EMCO meetings, this support team being the de-facto EMCO secretariat. The support team consists of officials from the Commission.

The Commission also directly participates in the EMCO meetings,^{ix} where they play a situation-defining role even though an elected representative from one of the Member States always holds the presidency. The Commission representative (which is the general secretary or deputy general secretary of the General Directorate for Employment and Social Affairs) normally presents his or her own view concerning the point on the agenda as the first speaker. This also means that the EMCO debates are often based on a verbal presentation by the Commission. While the Commission plays the situation-defining role, it does not possess the status of being an actor with professional

authority. The majority of the EMCO members perceive the Commission as a political player among others in the EMCO. Very often, the following discussions in the EMCO meetings are also akin to a political dogfight from word-to-word and sentence-to-sentence as concerns the recommendations issued to the ministers as cover notes regarding the various reports from the Commission.

The conclusion concerning Hypothesis 2 is that it is difficult to substantiate whether or not it has been confirmed. However, there might be some evidence that the lack of learning processes taking place among the European Union Member States are due to the fact the learning processes here are excessively politicised.

Re hypothesis 3): learning is more likely when the group is faced with clear evidence of political failure.

According to the quantitative data concerning this hypothesis, members with higher than average unemployment rates in their Member States did indeed report a higher degree of learning as a result of their EMCO participation. A positive correlation between the unemployment rates in the Member States of the respondent could be established based on the quantitative data. Assuming a linear relationship between the variables, a moderate positive Pearson correlation^x of 0.384, the correlation is significant with a p-value of 0.043. In conclusion, the working hypothesis of Hypothesis 3 can to some extent be substantiated by the statistical analysis; of course bearing in mind the limited number of respondents in the survey.

Re hypothesis 4): learning is more likely in groups in which individuals share a common professional background.

The various presidencies also organize an informal two-to-three day meeting twice annually in which the presidency has included an element of socializing. The agenda is often broader, including elements of exchange of policy information and academic presentations reflecting the fact that most EMCO members have a longstanding professional background in European employment policy. The aim is to further boost the level of professionalism for officials, all of whom share a background in the social sciences, i.e. law, economics or political science.

At the same time, the EMCO participants are forced to “sell” the common EMCO opinions to their own ministers when they are briefing him or her prior to the Council of Ministers meeting. In this manner, the common knowledge of the EMCO is often transformed into what is perceived to be a national stock of knowledge regarding employment policy, though often only at the political level.

As far as the EES is concerned, in other words, the learning processes are basically highly politicised, meaning that there are fewer shifts in the language-situated relations to other decision-makers such as, for example, new hegemonic concepts etc., as the professional background is often more or less “compromised” by the high degree of politicising. A fact pulling in the same direction is that many of the EMCO participants are senior officials from the ministries’ international or European relations department, which often has limited contact to the domestic policy departments in the ministries. Hence, the ability of the EES to create trajectories of participation is somewhat limited.

In conclusion, it is impossible to confirm Hypothesis 4 on the basis of the empirical material in this paper.

Re hypothesis 5): learning is more likely when an authoritative member is the persuader.

The fundamental concepts characterizing the EMCO meetings are the twin concepts of flexibility and security with regard to rules on notice, maximum working hours, part-time work etc. The EMCO debate is normally fragmented into Member States stressing flexibility and security, respectively. According to the wing stressing flexibility, increasing labour market flexibility is required to unlock dynamics of significance to employment creation, whereas job security regulations ought to be modernized with regard to an increased focus on improving employability. This wing regards the Commission as a prime defender of “pure” security regulations on the labour market together with, among others, France, Luxembourg, Spain, Greece and Belgium. In practice, the EMCO decisions are made unanimously, which is, at the same time, a force behind the harmonization of the point of view around the fundamental concepts. The final EMCO decisions are, therefore, normally a delicate political balance between flexibility and security on the labour markets.

The main challenges to the Commission’s situation-defining role have increasingly been issued by the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland and occasionally Germany (especially since the initiation of the Hartz reform process of the German labour market).

In general, the organization of the EES is a highly centralised political “compromise machine”. Due to the tensions within the EMCO and the fight over sentences and concepts, the outcome is normally balanced and a result of the argumentative “survival of the fittest”; however, the Commission plays the situation-defining role.

At the same time, Member States with a successful employment policy are normally able to act as authoritative EMCO members. They are occasionally able to play a persuasive role vis-à-vis the Commission and other Member States. Obviously, domestic policy success increases your authority within the EMCO – and vice versa. This will, of course, increase the potential learning effects of participating in the EMCO meetings. At the same time, there are clear limits as to how much certain Member States (no matter how successful they are) can go against the prevailing and argumentative logic within the EMCO as defined by the Commission and the supportive Member States.

The conclusion concerning Hypothesis 5 is that there is a lack of hard empirical evidence to confirm it. However, the strong role of the Commission might be an indication of the impossibility of others playing the role as an authoritative persuasive member.

4. Data on Nordic Learning Processes in the Employment Field

Even though the OMC is now connected to the EU, policy coordination along the same lines as in the OMC has existed for many years among the Nordic countries (Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the three semi-autonomous areas: Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Aaland Islands). In the employment field, the convention on a common Nordic labour market was implemented in 1954. In 1971, this kind of Nordic “hard” law was supplemented with “soft” legal coordination procedures, according to which officials as well as various experts meet on a regular basis in order to discuss experiences with their national labour market policies. The cornerstone of the Nordic learning processes in the employment field is the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour Market and Working Environment (the usual abbreviation used for this committee is EKA, which is an acronym of the committee’s Scandinavian name).

The data for this study has been collected using an electronic questionnaire (SurveyXact), which was e-mailed to respondents in the Nordic countries on January 10, 2005. The respondents were given approximately three weeks to complete the questionnaire.^{xi} Electronic surveys remain a relatively new approach, and a possible source of error inherent to this approach in the past has been bias in sampling, as some groups tend to use IT less than others, i.e. senior participants.^{xiii} This source of error is minimal in this study, however, as the entire population was online. 10 of the 15 EKA members responded to the questionnaire, providing an acceptable response rate of roughly 67 percent. Although the EKA response rate does not raise any serious questions regarding the validity of the survey, the low finite number of

respondents may cause problems in subsequent statistical analysis, as most statistical models require n to be larger than 30 in order to be exact.

As in the case of the EMCO, the composite learning index consists of three different indicators based on questions in which respondents were asked how often they have learned something new from the Nordic Co-operation; how often they have reconsidered or modified their preferences as a result of ideas, knowledge or documentation obtained at the meetings; and how often ideas and experiences from other Nordic countries have made a strong impression on them.^{xiii}

As in the questionnaire distributed among the EMCO members, the participants could rate their response to the three questions from “Very often” (= 5 points) to “Never” (= 1 point^{xiv}) or “Don’t know” (= 6, subsequently eliminated). As all three indicators contain variables designating the same scale, the learning index can be constructed by simple addition, thereby creating an index with a minimum value of three points (no learning) and a maximum value of 15 points (maximal learning).

In the table below, the composite learning index for the Nordic countries in the EKA is presented. This is – as in the case of the EMCO – a necessary digression in the analysis of the paper, as the national differences are used to test the hypothesis in the rest of the section.

Table: Composite Learning Index for Nordic Countries in the EKA^{xv}

Country	Composite learning index
Finland	9
Sweden	10
Norway	8.5
Iceland	11
Faroe Islands	7.5
Aaland Islands	12
Greenland ^{xvi}	15

N = 10.

Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003) used the same index (with minor variations^{xvii}) in their study of the EMCO from 2003. Hence, the data from the EMCO and the EKA are perfectly comparable. As was the case in the study of the EMCO, however, the tests of partial correlations between the three indicators do raise some preliminary questions. As was mentioned in section 3, in order to ensure that the indicators in the index are in fact measuring the same dimension without being redundant, partial correlations ought to have a gamma-value of between 0.3 and 0.8. In reality, the gamma values of the EKA study were 0.445^{xviii}, 0.407^{xix} and 0.192^{xx}, indicating that ‘Strong Impression’ is not a strong indicator to add to the learning index; however, at the same time, it was not a significant source of error. In order to ensure comparability with the EMCO survey, the following has therefore been included in the analysis:

As in section 3, five hypotheses are suggested as explanations of the learning processes (or lack thereof). In the remainder of this section, these hypotheses are analysed on the basis of the qualitative and quantitative data.

Re hypothesis 1): learning is more likely when a group meets repeatedly.

In the employment field, the Nordic ministers meet annually and the EKA meets together semi-annually with a number of expert committees (on health and safety at work, safety at work research, on labour law, and on labour market policy), which themselves also meet twice a year. In this study, as only one of the respondents had attended less than five meetings, this measure was skewed and not a valid parameter for repeated and frequent interaction.

The ministers normally meet in September, and the EKA meets a fortnight before in order to prepare the ministerial meeting. In all cases, the meetings last about two days and contain an element of socialising. In many ways, the EMCO functions correspond to the EKA, but the number of EKA meetings is only half that of the EMCO. This fact points in the direction of a lower learning potential in the EKA than in the EMCO. On the other hand, the number of meetings that members have attended probably only tells part of the story about the learning potential in the committee, also in the case of the EKA. Besides, relative to the EMCO, the EKA meetings are “supported” by a large number of expert committees.

The average score on the composite learning index for the 11 respondents of a total number of 14 from the EKA is slightly lower than the overall average for the Nordic co-operation in the employment field in general (including all of the expert committees), with a score of 9.80 compared to an average of 10.04.

The conclusion concerning Hypothesis 1 is that it is impossible to determine whether or not it is confirmed on the basis of the data presented in this paper. However, due to the general score on the composite learning index, it appears as though the general frequency of meetings in the EKA is at a satisfactory level in order not to impair the learning processes.

Re hypothesis 2): learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure.

At all three of the levels – i.e. the ministerial level, senior official level and expert level – involved in the Nordic cooperation in the employment field, cooperation is characterised by a very intensive exchange of information and a significant degree of autonomy. Each of the participating countries

produces reports for every meeting regarding the latest developments in the employment field. Much of the Nordic meetings are spent on presenting these reports. At the same time, the committees on all three levels each have their own budget, which can be used to organize seminars, minor research projects etc. in order to exchange views and best practises. At the end of the day, however, the EKA determines which of the expert committee projects are to be implemented, and the EKA can, at the same time, initiate projects of its own.

All projects concern initiatives where so-called “Nordic utility” is included, i.e. projects where the Nordic countries encounter similar problems concerning their national employment policies. Examples of these projects are the integration of immigrants into the labour markets; decreasing the number of people on sickness absence; statistical questions concerning equal treatment of men and women; and health risks in various job functions. The numerous seminars, projects, meetings and conferences have created an environment in which mutual learning through a relatively decentralised exchange of information and experiences proceeds very quickly among the Nordic countries.

No academic research has previously been conducted to analyse the effects of the Nordic “open method of coordination” in the employment field. However, one should expect relatively large learning effects due to a relatively high degree of de-politicisation owing to the relative autonomous status of the EKA compared to the EMCO, which is more insulated from political constraints than is the EMCO. This is also underlined by the budgetary freedom to organize projects on mutual learning; the informality and lack of power plays at the Nordic meetings; and the fact that the national representatives in Nordic committees often comes from departments which are involved in domestic policy-making in various areas of the employment policy. Trajectories of participation are hereby created, resulting in larger mutual learning effects when everything else is equal.

However, contrary to the working hypothesis, the variable concerning interest on the part of the minister reveals a moderately strong positive correlation with learning ($\gamma = 0.630$), and the correlation is significant with a p-value of 0.019 below the threshold of 0.05. This means that EKA members have a higher score on the composite learning index when their minister is interested in the work proceeding within the EKA; however, the statistics behind this result are deemed inadequate, as n is too small.

The variable interest on the part of the state secretary also reflects a moderately strong positive correlation with learning ($\gamma = 0.500$), which is at odds with the working hypothesis; however, the correlation here is not significant, with a p-value higher than 0.05, at 0.089.

A probable conclusion concerning hypothesis 2 is that political interest from ministers and state secretaries has a positive influence on learning; however, only when they maintain this interest at the general level allowing the autonomous discussion and free deliberation to proceed. In other words, as far as the facilitation of learning processes is

concerned, the optimal institutional arrangement appears to be when ministers and state secretaries have a general interest in the work of a committee without interfering in the discussions, demanding mandates approved before discussions in the committee, and allowing the preparations of the ministerial meetings to occupy only a small part of the agenda of the committee.

Re hypothesis 3): learning is more likely when the group encounters clear evidence of political failure.

In the working hypothesis concerning hypothesis 3, it is asserted that the proxy for policy failure in this particular field is the unemployment rate. In general, the variation in the size of the unemployment figures is much smaller among the Nordic countries than is the case among the European Member States. This ought to indicate a lesser potential for learning among the Nordic countries.

This is also confirmed by the data from the EKA study on the grounds that when using the unemployment rate in 2003 from the Nordic countries as a proxy for political failure, a linear relationship between unemployment and learning can be tested (treating both variables as scale). There appears to be no significant relationship in the data, as the p-value is 0.539 far above the threshold of 0.05. The same holds true when drawing comparisons with the unemployment rate in 2001.

Hypothesis 3 was confirmed in the analysis concerning the EMCO. At the same time, the conclusion concerning hypothesis 3 is, therefore, that one ought to expect a much larger potential for learning in the EMCO than in the EKA.

Re hypothesis 4): learning is more likely in groups in which individuals share a common professional background.

The professional background of the EKA members is the social sciences (law, economics, and political science), as in the EMCO. On this basis, it is difficult to find any differences; however, the professional background in the EKA (as well as in the EMCO) is reinforced through the professional arrangement concerning employment policy.

On the basis of the empirical evidence concerning the Nordic countries in this paper, it is impossible to confirm Hypothesis 4.

Re hypothesis 5): learning is more likely when an authoritative member is persuader.

The secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers is represented at all of the EKA meetings, but it merely serves as the facilitator and practical organizer of the meetings. The Nordic country holding the presidency is normally playing the situation-defining role; however, compared to the EMCO, the Nordic meetings are more loosely structured. This is also because relatively few concrete results are expected to come out of these meetings. Recommendations and reports are adopted, but this is not – as in the case of the EMCO – part of an annual routine, and the public rarely notices it. In

short, the material concerning whether or not a member is playing the role of an authoritative persuader is relatively limited.

In conclusion, on the basis of the empirical evidence concerning the Nordic countries in this paper, it is not possible to conclude anything concerning Hypothesis 5.

7. OMC Learning Effects: European and Nordic experiences in comparison

For the 10 respondents from the EKA, the mean score on the composite learning index is 9.8, while the mean score for the 21 EMCO respondents is 9.3. On the surface and from this perspective, it can be concluded that the learning effect was higher in the EKA than in the EMCO.

In order to accept this conclusion, however, a central underlying assumption must also be accepted: that both variables are not measured in a sample, but instead are measured in the entire relevant population. This assumption is supported by the fact that the EMCO learning score was calculated for 21 respondents out of a total of 41 possible respondents (a response rate of roughly 51 percent), while the EKA learning score was calculated for 10 of 15 possible respondents (a response rate of roughly 67 percent). It is clear, however, that any statistical analysis is weakened by the low absolute number of respondents, as most statistical models require n to be larger than 30 in order to calculate significance and correlations in a valid manner.

When results are treated as samples of a finite population, it is no longer possible to conclude that there is any difference in the learning index mean between groups, as the maximum possible value of the EMCO mean in the population (9.775) is higher than the minimum possible value of the EKA mean in the population (8.945), meaning that the learning index means may be equal in the populations.^{xxi}

As has been argued throughout this paper, there are therefore pros and cons as far as the institutional arrangements of the EMCO and the EKA are concerned when the aim is to investigate the institutional arrangement facilitating transnational learning processes the most. The dimensions of the Nordic learning processes might be somewhat higher than among the EU Member States, but there are undoubtedly also factors found in the European Employment Strategy facilitating transnational learning processes which are nonexistent in the Nordic cooperation in the employment field such as the more routine decision-making, the more in-depth documentation, and the fact that the EES is, in general, taken more seriously than the Nordic cooperation in the employment field.

As far as hypothesis 1 is concerned – which asserts that learning is more likely when groups meet repeatedly – the impressionistic indication concerning the EMCO is that attending more meetings may increase respondents' scores on the composite learning index. It was, however, difficult to substantiate this hypothesis using statistical methods. In the EKA, this is the case to an even lesser degree. At the same time, a discrepancy between the EMCO and the difference between the EMCO and the EKA is that the EMCO meets four times annually, while the EKA only meets semi-annually. In principle, therefore, the learning potential in the EKA ought to be lower than in the EMCO due to this

factor alone. However, the relative high score in the EKA seems to indicate that semi-annual meetings are sufficient to safeguard a large learning potential.

Hypothesis 2 asserts that learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure. As far as the EMCO is concerned, the agenda is governed by the political agenda of the Council of Ministers. Consequently, the EMCO negotiations are highly politicised, and the EMCO discussions are akin to a political dogfight from sentence-to-sentence over the content of the policy recommendations that the committee must send to the Council. All told, this reflects a relatively low potential for learning stemming from participation in the EMCO meetings. However, contrary to the working hypothesis regarding hypothesis 2, the variable concerning interest on the part of the minister reveals a moderately strong correlation with learning. This means that the member of the EKA has a higher score on the composite learning index when his or her minister is interested in the EKA work. Although the statistics behind this result are inadequate, as *n* is too small, a probable conclusion concerning this hypothesis is that political interest from ministers has a positive influence on transnational learning; however, only when the ministers are not interfering with discussions in the committee through “hard” or “soft” mandates, and only when the preparations of the ministerial meetings only constitute a small part of the committee agenda.

Hypothesis 3 asserts that learning is more likely when a group encounters clear evidence of political failure that can – in the employment field – be interpreted as a high unemployment rate. According to the quantitative data concerning this hypothesis, the EMCO members with higher than average unemployment rates in their Member States did indeed report a higher degree of learning as a result of their EMCO participation. Assuming a linear relationship between the variables, a moderate positive correlation could be established, though one must bear in mind the limited number of respondents in the survey. The opposite situation was the case for the Nordic cooperation in the EKA: when using the unemployment rate in 2003, there appears to be no significant relationship in the quantitative data. In general, however, the variation in the size of the unemployment figures is much smaller among the Nordic countries than among the EU Member States. This indicates lesser potential for learning among the Nordic countries. In short, however, the hypothesis appears to have been confirmed.

Hypothesis 4 asserts that learning is more likely in groups in which individuals share a common professional background. Both in the EMCO and in the EKA, academic presentations and discussions based upon the background of the participants in economics, law and political science appear to be a general characteristic intended to further elevate the level of professionalism in employment policy. At the same time, the learning potential for this group of people is probably somewhat smaller relative to the participants with a specialist education in, for example, medicine. Besides, because of the highly and very directly politicised intellectual environment in the EMCO, the common professional background might play a less important role in the EMCO, thereby impairing the potential learning processes in the EMCO relative to the EKA. However, in short, there is not enough empirical evidence to substantiate Hypothesis 4 in this paper.

Hypothesis 5 asserts that learning is more likely when an authoritative member is persuader. There is no hard data concerning Hypothesis 5 in this paper. On the one hand, the Commission is playing the situation-defining role in the

EMCO, whereas it is the country holding the presidency in the EKA. This might point in the direction of a higher learning potential in the EKA if the country holding the presidency has the necessary authority, which the Commission often lacks on the grounds that it is perceived to belong to the “employment protection wing” of the EMCO. This might point in the direction of larger learning effects in the EKA. On the other hand, the EKA is more loosely structured. This is because relatively few concrete results are expected to come out of the EKA meetings. Recommendations and reports are adopted, but this is not – as in the EMCO – part of a yearly routine and is hardly ever noticed by the public. This might point in the direction of fewer learning effects at the Nordic level, as at least the same level of interest from the political level appears to facilitate learning, cf. Hypothesis 2.

8. Conclusion

In the introduction to this paper, three questions were addressed concerning the transnational learning processes in the EU and among the Nordic countries: first, what characterizes the mutual learning processes of the OMC in the EU employment field? Second, what characterizes the mutual learning processes among the Nordic countries in their cooperation in the employment field? Third, and most importantly, when comparing the experiences with the learning processes in the EU and among the Nordic countries, what are the reasons for the apparent differences on how mutual or transnational learning processes are most efficiently diffused or facilitated among a group of Member States?

Transnational learning processes in the EU employment field have a number of specific characteristics. The participants meet frequently and regularly, creating a solid basis for potential learning processes. However, the meetings of the European Employment Committee are totally governed by the agenda of the Council of Ministers and, therefore, highly politicised. This fact reduces the efficacy of the potential learning processes. At the same time, the fact that variations in political failures in the employment field are relatively large in the EU increases the learning effects, according to participants. The professional background is the usual generalist education in various social science disciplines, though naturally with a longstanding specific knowledge in employment policy. Finally, there is no actor with persuasive authority facilitating the European learning processes.

Transnational learning processes in the employment field among the Nordic countries also have a number of specific characteristics. Participants meet on a regular basis two times a year. The meetings are highly depoliticised, allowing room for a free and open exchange of views and information on employment policy; basically, this facilitates transnational learning processes. However, the present paper also points to the fact that some degree of political interest on the part of the minister actually facilitates the transnational learning processes among the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries lack great variations in the unemployment figures, meaning that the potential is somewhat reduced. The professional background of the officials engaged in the Nordic cooperation is the same as for the participants in the European co-operation, however, more Nordic officials hail from domestic policy departments in their national bureaucracies, which increases the learning potential.

When comparing the experiences with transnational learning processes in the EU and among the Nordic countries, I will tentatively suggest that an optimal institutional setting intended to facilitate the transnational learning processes would be one which

- means that officials meet on a regular basis two times annually or more;
- has a system of expert committees that supports the international committees for cooperation with expertise;
- involves the relevant ministers and state secretaries to an extent to which they display an interest in the work dealing with transnational learning processes;
- ministers avoid directly interfering in discussions in the work of the committees through mandates;
- sets up the institution in order to organize the learning processes, allowing considerable room for deliberation;
- sets up the institution in order to function as more than an organ that merely prepares meetings at the political level;
- concentrates the transnational learning processes on efforts in policy areas where the variations in the policy results are large;
- involves officials that are persons with a longstanding professional background; and
- chooses persons for international work with transnational learning processes that possess an authority in domestic policy making and administrative work.

However, much more research appears to be necessary in order to investigate all of the aspects of transnational learning processes among the European Union Member States and the Nordic countries. Several of the hypotheses listed in this paper have not been sufficiently substantiated, as the empirical evidence in the collected data was too weak. Obviously, the methodology used should be supplemented with interviews of relevant participants in the analysed learning processes. At the same time, there would appear to be reason to believe that the need to understand the learning processes in the international and political sphere will grow dramatically in the years to come as the traditional regulatory methods are exhausted.

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ⁱⁱ Norway, Iceland and the semi-autonomous areas of Greenland and the Faroe Islands are not members of the European Union.

ⁱⁱⁱ Transnational learning and mutual learning are used as synonymous concepts in this paper.

^{iv} ‘Concept’ is used here in accordance with Wittgenstein’s terminology; political theorists may note that it is applied here with predominantly philosophical connotations.

^v The internal processes that facilitate learning processes understood as the harmonization of linguistic categories and acceptance of new concepts might be initiated from the outside, but they nonetheless function internally and are categorized accordingly.

^{vi} In the current questionnaire, “Very often” is designated (1), and “Never” is designated (5), but the numbers must be inverted in order to construct a valid index; otherwise a low score on the index would imply a high degree of learning. Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003) designated “Very often” (5) and “Never” (1).

^{vii} A gamma value can be defined as a symmetric measure of the association between two ordinal variables ranging between negative 1 and 1. Values close to an absolute value of 1 indicate a strong relationship between the two variables. Values close to zero indicate little or no relationship.

^{viii} The alpha value for the index that designates overall reliability also rises from 0.66 to 0.76 when “Strong impression” is left out, meaning that the learning index is more reliable when “Strong impression” is not included as an indicator. The alpha value can be defined as a model of internal consistency as based on the average inter-item correlation.

^{ix} The secretariat of the Council of Ministers is also represented at the EMCO meetings, but normally remains very quiet.

^x The Pearson correlation coefficient measures the linear association between two scale variables.

^{xi} On account of problems with e-mail addresses, five e-mails were sent between January 11 and January 17. Over the course of the process, several reminders were sent to respondents who had not yet answered.

^{xii} Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003) also used electronic questionnaires. They noted that the response rate for respondents in some Member States with less Internet penetration was slightly lower than average; however, they attempted to compensate for this bias by posting printed questionnaires upon request.

^{xiii} See section 3 for the exact wording of these three questions.

^{xiv} In the current questionnaire, “Very often” is designated (1), and “Never” is designated (5), but the numbers must be inverted in order to construct a valid index; otherwise a low score on the index would imply a high degree of learning. Ørnsholt & Vestergaard (2003) designated “Very often” (5) and “Never” (1).

^{xv} Denmark is not mentioned in the table, as the Danish representative did not answer all of the questions relevant to the construction of the learning index.

^{xvi} Although the respondent from Greenland may be an outlier, the response does fit with other measures, that is, that the answers from the respondents fit the questions on learning in the questionnaire.

^{xvii} The words “Open Method of Coordination” have been substituted with “Nordic Co-operation” in the questionnaire for this study.

^{xviii} Partial correlation on the questions concerning “New knowledge” (question 1 in section 3) and “Preferences” (question 3 in section 3) controlling for “Strong Impression” (question 2 in section 3).

^{xix} Partial correlation on the questions concerning “New knowledge” (question 1 in section 3) and “Strong Impression” (question 2 in section 3) controlling for “Preferences” (question 3 in section 3).

^{xx} Partial correlation on the questions concerning “Strong Impression” (question 2 in section 3) and “Preferences” (question 3 in section 3) controlling for “New knowledge” (question 1 in section 3).

^{xxi} This problem can be illustrated by treating the results from both of the above groups as samples of finite populations. If both learning index means have been compiled on the basis of samples, then the uncertainty caused by inferring from a sample to a population also must be added to the equation by calculating a confidence interval: for the EMCO group, the standard error of mean is 0.353, whereas the correction for a finite population is a factor of 0.707, and a z-score of 1.96 is chosen. The standard error of mean was calculated by SPSS, while the finite population correction factor $=\sqrt{\left(\frac{N-n}{N-1}\right)}$, has been calculated by inserting $N = 41$ and $n = 21$, and the z-score of 1.96 is for a 95 percent confidence interval, meaning that the mean will be within the calculated range in 95 percent of cases. The mean for the population is calculated as mean \pm standard error \times z-score \times correction factor. The same goes for the EKA calculations. The calculated mean for the EMCO population is then 9.286 \pm 0.489. For the EKA group, the standard error of mean is 0.786, whereas the correction for a finite population is a factor of 0.555, and the z-score of 1.96 is again chosen. The calculated mean for the EKA population is then 9.8 \pm 0.855.