



# Public employment services: Building social resilience in youth?

Marie-Luise Assmann<sup>1</sup> | Ida Tolgensbakk<sup>2</sup> | Janikke S. Vedeler<sup>2</sup> | Kjetil K. Bøhler<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Sciences, Social Stratification, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Ammerlaender Heerstr, 114-118, Oldenburg, 26129, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

## Correspondence

Ida Tolgensbakk, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway.  
Email: ida.tolgensbakk@oslomet.no

## Funding information

This research was conducted as part of the NEGOTIATE project, funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 649395.

## Abstract

It is contested to what extent public employment services (PES) help build resilience in young unemployed people. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 19 people born in Germany and Norway between 1990 and 1995, the article examines stories about how PES, in two different activation regimes, help young people find meaningful work. The analysis and discussion are carried out within a theoretical framework that combines the capability approach with social resilience literature in a novel way. The findings show that PES are portrayed as being more present in young Germans' lives. The German informants seem to feel undue pressure from PES and they describe differences between personal aims and the "placement priority" of PES. Sanctions imposed by PES were also a much more predominant topic among the German informants. The Norwegian data were dominated by stories about young people in activation programmes who had been demotivated by being trapped in a cycle of programme participation, which did not result in employment. Across the two countries, our data suggest that PES rarely build social resilience: PES provided young people with a means

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2020 The Authors. Social Policy & Administration published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

to survive, but rarely helped to build their capacity to overcome their difficult situation. In line with previous research, the stories of young Germans and Norwegians also emphasise the need for a PES that provides tailor-made services that build on young people's motivation and ambition. The article demonstrates that combining the capability approach with social resilience theory enables a dynamic perspective on the development of people's capabilities.

#### KEYWORDS

capability approach, employment policy, international comparison, social resilience, unemployment, youth policy

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Do public employment services (PES) in Germany and Norway help young people find meaningful work? Through a comparative study comprising 19 qualitative interviews with young adults in the two countries, we explore this question based on theoretical perspectives related to capability and social resilience. All interviewees experienced unemployment during the financial crisis or in its aftermath (Chung & Van Oorschot, 2011). Our data offer unique insights into how young people experience unemployment<sup>1</sup>.

PES play an important role in the everyday lives of unemployed people, especially among disadvantaged young adults with limited access to other support (Thuy, Hansen, & Price, 2001, p. 42). The services offered by PES aim to provide people with a basic income and improve their chances of future employment through active labour market policies (henceforth ALMP). However, it has been contested whether these instruments actually build resilience among young unemployed people (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Bussi, 2016; Gottuck & Otto, 2014) and enable them to find work and live a life that "they have reason to value" (Sen, 2009, p. 227). This is the question we explore in this article.

Norway and Germany's strategies for helping unemployed youth share many characteristics and both have strong institutional support systems for youth. However, they represent two different *activation regimes* as regards their active labour market policies (Pascual, 2007). Comparing how young adults navigate public employment services in the two countries makes it possible to explore what significance these policies have in an individual's life, in similar, yet different contexts.

The article is divided into five parts. Firstly, we develop the theoretical framework, building on Bussi et al. (2019). Secondly, we describe how youth labour market policies work in Germany and Norway. Thirdly, we introduce our sample and the methodological approach. Fourthly, we analyse our interview data to discuss whether the tools used by PES help to build social resilience in young Germans and Norwegians. Finally, we revisit our question in the conclusion, identifying the differences and similarities between the narrative data across the two national contexts.

<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank all the interviewees for taking part in the study. We would also like to thank Mi Ah Schøyen for her excellent feedback to manuscript drafts and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

## 2 | A FRAMEWORK FOR THE CAPABILITY APPROACH AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Conceptually, we combine the capability approach (Sen, 1993) with theories on social resilience (Obrist, Pfeiffer, Henley, & Robert, 2010) to examine how young people can build resilience in form of proactive and reactive capacities when they interact with and receive support from PES.

Amartya Sen's *Capability Approach* (2009, henceforth CA) draws attention to a person's relative freedom and possibilities to live a life according to his or her visions and values in specific contexts. While this approach has been widely adopted, it has seldom been used to explore youth employment (Bussi, 2016). This approach is productive for our study because it puts young people's opportunities at the centre of the analysis. CA goes beyond economic models by considering the extent to which young unemployed people can live a life according to their personal wishes and needs (Otto et al., 2015). This approach makes it possible to examine the "resources" a person has and the actual opportunities that arise from these resources, what Sen calls "capabilities" or "capability set" (Sen, 2009, p. 225). "Functionings" refers to the choices people make to enhance subjective capability in a given context. (Sen, 1992, p. 40). Functionings can vary over time and may be influenced by a wide range of what Sen calls "conversion factors" (1981, pp. 26–30). Conversion factors refer to the ways in which people can convert the characteristics of their resources in order to improve their capability set (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99).

While CA has influenced a number of studies in the social sciences (e.g., Beitz, 2011; McRobbie, 2009; Nussbaum, 2009), Robeyns argues that a potential weakness of the approach is its tendency to "conceptualize, measure, and assess the distribution of well-being in a population" (Robeyns, 2016, p. 403) rather than exploring subjective perceptions of "active agency" (Giddens, in Held & Thompson, 1989, p. 37) through in-depth qualitative studies. Robeyns proposes that the CA approach can be strengthened by integrating relevant theoretical perspectives from other fields (Robeyns, 2016). Inspired by Robeyns, we propose triangulating the presented CA arguments with theoretical perspectives on "social resilience," which Obrist et al. (2010), p. 289) describe as:

[The] capacity of actors to access capitals to cope, adjust (reactive capacity) to adverse conditions and/or search for and create options (proactive capacity) and thus increase competence in dealing with a threat.

Particularly relevant to the present study is their focus on "reactive" and "proactive" capacities. Reactive capacity includes actions people may take to deal with and overcome immediate threats (like unemployment); thus, the concept is very much in line with Keck and Sakdapolrak's (2013, p. 19) understanding of "coping capacity." Proactive capacity can comprise actions people take to learn from the past and adapt to future challenges, in line with Keck and Sakdapolrak's (2013, p. 19) adaptive capacity. By relating social resilience to both present and future risk, Keck and Sakdapolrak stress temporality and the dynamic nature of the concept. This adds to the rather static viewpoint of the CA. It helps us to examine not only the influence of PES interventions on the present capabilities of young unemployed people, but also their ability to help them to bear and overcome the threat of unemployment in a short and a long-term perspective.

PES can be regarded as a social conversion factor that hampers and/or facilitates reactive and proactive capacities in young unemployed individuals. PES offer benefits and programmes that can potentially enhance personal conversion factors (Bartelheimer, Verd, Lehweß-Litzmann, López-Andreu, & Schmidt, 2012, pp. 33–34; Bonvin & Orton, 2009, p. 568)—or they can sanction youth to steer them in desired directions. PES thereby have a potential impact on young people's skills and qualifications, their vocational orientation and their psychological well-being. These personal conversion factors can enhance young people's capability set with respect to their options for employment or further education.

We understand social resilience not only as an individual trait, but also as a product of social structuration (Obrist et al., 2010, p. 284). In a critical assessment of the existing literature, Dagdeviren et al. (2016, p. 5) argue that

the influence of social structure, including social institutions, on resilience “has often been pushed to the background or presented with a degree of superficiality.” Thus, our study contributes to the understanding of the development of social resilience in young unemployed people by analysing the influence the social institution PES has on it. However, before we elaborate on methods and apply these arguments to case studies in Germany and Norway, we outline key features of labour market policies targeting young people in the two countries.

### 3 | LABOUR MARKET POLICIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN GERMANY AND IN NORWAY

Germany and Norway share a tradition for labour market strategies that specifically target youth (Jantz, 2017). Norway is even a pioneer country in this area, with the first Youth Guarantee scheme being introduced as early as 1979 (Olofsson, 2008, p. 314). Follow-up Services with horizontal coordination between different actors at the local level were established in 1994 (Lindholm, Tolgensbakk, & Vedeler, 2016, p. 21). Both countries' youth employment policies have focused on a long-term “enablement” strategy based on educating youth rather than pursuing a “work-first approach” with the objective of fast job integration (Dingeldey, Assmann, & Steinberg, 2017, p. 16). Both countries have reformed their PES in recent decades—the 2005 NAV reform in Norway and the 2002 Hartz reforms in Germany—with the aim of activating the unemployed and making services more user-friendly (Fimreite, Christensen, & Læg Reid, 2012, p. 5).

Despite these similarities, Germany and Norway differ with respect to the age from which young people are treated as independent citizens (Walther, 2006, p. 128), and as regards the level of benefits available to them. Moreover, the countries represent two different *activation regimes* in terms of their active labour market policies (Pascual, 2007). Young people in Norway are treated as independent citizens from the age of 18 and may then apply for social security benefits independently of their families. Low, means-tested social assistance is the only type of financial support widely available to unemployed youth. Local offices determine this on a case-by-case basis, and there is no statutory minimum rate (Schoyen & Vedeler, 2016, p. 33). The overall level of means-tested social assistance for unemployed youth is relatively lower than in Germany (Kvist, Fritzell, Hvinden, & Kangas, 2011, p. 78). It is also striking that Norwegian youth unemployment is hidden away in the health-related benefits system, which has been described as a medicalisation of labour market problems (OECD, 2018). Whereas unemployment rates are quite low, the rates of sickness and disability benefit recipients is remarkably high compared with the rest of Europe (Statistics Norway, 2016). Benefit entitlements for young people in Germany often depend on family income since, in the German social security system, youth are not treated as independent citizens before the age of 25. Thus, until reaching this age, many young people living with their parents do not receive benefits (Chevalier, 2015, pp. 15–16). The most relevant benefit for unemployed youth in Germany is the flat rate Unemployment Benefit II provided by the job centres, which are governed by the Federal PES and/or the respective municipalities.

With respect to its youth activation policy, based on Pascual's typology, Germany can be categorised as a *civic contractualism regime*, while Norway's youth activation policy is an *autonomous citizens regime*. The major difference between the two regimes is that, in the German regime, the emphasis of the activation policy lies on correcting the shortcomings of the unemployed individuals, while, in contrast, Norway emphasises correcting shortcomings in labour market matching (Pascual, 2007, p. 301). In Germany, the focus is on the duties of the young people even though their rights are guaranteed by a strong welfare state (Eichhorst, Grienberger-Zingerle, & Konle-Seidl, 2008, p. 27). Germany invests a comparatively large amount of money in ALMPs, and young unemployed people in Germany can benefit from a broad variety of measures (Heidenreich and Aurich-Berheide, 2014, p. 9; Assmann et al., 2017, pp. 8–9). Multiple actors are involved in order to provide professional support for young people. In the last decade *youth career agencies* have been introduced in many places. They combine different support services for young people locally (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2014). At the same time, Germany's activation policy is based on a contract in the form of an individual action plan of a punitive nature. Unemployment Benefit II is linked to relatively

strict requirements: applying for a certain number of jobs per month, responding to “placement proposals” suggested by the PES, and participating in appointments with caseworkers and in agreed measures or programmes (Jacobi & Mohr, 2007, p. 227–228; Eichhorst et al., 2008, pp. 34–36). In extreme cases, Unemployment Benefit II may be reduced by up to 100% (Schreyer, Zahradnik, & Götz, 2012, p. 213).

The official aims of PES in Germany are formulated as “the reduction of welfare dependency, improving integration into employment or education, and avoiding long-term unemployment” (BMAS, 2017, p. 3). The German PES has concrete performance indicators and target figures defined at the national level (BMAS, 2017, pp. 7–8), which is typical of the new approaches to public policy management in this regime type. Swift labour market integration may be achieved at the expense of quality and long-term perspective of the jobs found (Jacobi & Mohr, 2007, pp. 233–234). Compared to Germany, the Norwegian PES's official aims place greater emphasis on the individual citizen (Hammer, 2007): it attempts “to enhance people's possibility of gaining work, of engaging in meaningful activity and of finding income security” (NAV, 2013). Contractualisation also plays an increasing role in the practice of the Norwegian PES, but it is more capability-friendly because it involves the individual motivation, participation and choice of the young people receiving benefits (Cappelen, 2009). Although sanctions are possible in Norway, they are seldom used (*ibid*). In Norway, high public spending is combined with investment in training programmes and thus long-term employability measures. Job creation schemes are another important type of measure. They aim to improve the demand side of the labour market (Rønsen and Skarðhamar, 2009). In the past decade, however, NAV has imposed more restrictions and applied additional criteria. In order to receive economic support, young people have to participate in a number of courses and apply regularly for jobs. Unemployed people are also encouraged to be mobile and be prepared to move to another place to find work. The gradual development of a stricter PES system started in Norway at the turn of the millennium, partly inspired by New Public Management (Fimreite et al., 2012). While, overall, the Norwegian PES is more universalistic and generous than the German PES, the two systems have become more similar in recent years. However, the activation policy in Norway can still be regarded as more capability-oriented (Sen, 2009) than the German system.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

The study draws on 19 story-oriented interviews with young adults, born between 1990 and 1995, in Norway (9 informants) and Germany (10 informants). The interviews were carried out in 2016. To be recruited for interviewing, candidates had to have experienced unemployment or job insecurity by the time they were 25 years of age. We recruited by various means, including through trade unions, interest organisations and social media. Participation in interviews was based on informed consent. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data reviewed the consent form and the interview guide to ensure adherence to research ethical guidelines.

The interview guide was thematically organised to investigate transition from school to unemployment. We explored how unemployment affected the informant's life situation, asked about opportunities to be active during unemployment and to benefit from support (from family, non-governmental organisations, the government). The interviews were carried out and transcribed in German and Norwegian. They were pseudonymised and provided with summaries in English before being shared among the involved researchers.

When reading the interviews, we examined how the informants experienced PES and caseworkers, focusing on forms of support (see Table 1). Subsequently, we moved to a more theory-driven analysis and assessed what the interviews could tell us about capability building and resilience. In the context of CA, reactive capacity would mean that the individual was not taking actions to change their capability set. Rather, they pursued actions to cope with the current amount of resources and current status quo as regards the available conversion factors, or actions taken to recover a previous level of resources. For example, reactive capacity would be manifested by young people trying to spend less money on food or cultural activities to deal with their new financial situation. PES can also add to a young person's reactive capacity by providing them with income-securing benefits. Proactive capacity could include

**TABLE 1** Overview of the interviewees, showing the different PES tools they were exposed to or actively used

Country	Cohort/gender	Pseudonym	PES			
			Guidance	Programme or measure	Cash benefits	Sanctions
Germany	1990-95/f	Adele	X	-	X	-
	1990-95/f	Annaliese	X	-	X	-
	1990-95/f	Claudia	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/f	Emilie	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/f	Gabriele	X	X	X	X
	1990-95/m	Achim	X	-	-	-
	1990-95/m	Arndt	X	X	X	X
	1990-95/m	Bastian	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/m	Dieter	X	X	X	X
	1990-95/m	Eric	X	-	X	-
Norway	1990-95/f	Sofie	-	-	-	-
	1990-95/f	Toril	-	-	-	-
	1990-95/f	Astrid	X	X	X	(X)
	1990-95/f	Anne Karin	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/f	Marit	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/m	Martin	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/m	Stig	X	X	X	-
	1990-95/m	Gustav	X	-	-	-
	1990-95/m	Anders	-	-	-	-

young people trying to change their point of departure by increasing their skills through training or by taking further education to improve their prospects in the labour market.

We applied a categorical-content analysis, which enables “the content of narratives as manifested in separate parts of the [complete] story” to be investigated (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 16). This analysis involved a circular process. We combined careful readings of the interviews with theoretical interpretation. Both proactive capacity and reactive capacities are important when one is unemployed, but aiming for a longer-term perspective, we particularly stressed signs of proactive capacities in our analysis.

The interviews were conducted in an interpersonal context between the informant and the researcher. Since participation relied on self-recruitment, we argue that informants also spoke to a larger social and cultural context (Squire, 2008, p. 44): informants clearly wanted others—people in similar situations as well as policymakers—to benefit from their experiences. In this sense, the researcher gave voice to their stories. Thus, one limitation of the research design is that it privileges the informants' stories; the caseworkers, for instance, are not given a voice here. However, we can also regard this privileging as a strength since knowledge about how young people perceive and experience their interaction with PES is limited.

## 5 | FINDINGS

When German and Norwegian PES are in contact with unemployed youth, they have four main tools:

- direct *guidance*, counselling and job search assistance

- placement in different types of *active labour market policy programmes and measures*
- *cash benefits* as a form of passive labour market policy
- reduction of benefits as a *sanction* if the recipients do not fulfil certain requirements

Two aspects are important to stress initially. In the analysis of the situation of unemployed youth in Germany, the term “PES” in this section only refers to the “job centres” that provide Unemployment Benefit II, since this was the only relevant benefit for all the young German interviewees. Secondly, in the Norwegian case, not all our interviewees turned to public welfare institutions for assistance. Whereas all the 10 German interviewees interacted with PES, three of the nine Norwegians said that they had not.

## 5.1 | Guidance provided by caseworkers: Conflicting aims

Guidance, counselling and job-search assistance provided by caseworkers or in the form of online self-help services are the most direct PES services for unemployed youth (Thuy et al., 2001, pp. 74–81). As Table 1 indicates, most of the interviewees received such guidance during their contact with PES. However, in the unemployment narratives, the German and Norwegian youth differ in how much they tell about their direct contact with PES caseworkers. In the Norwegian stories in general, guidance is not a central topic. In contrast, the German interviewees often describe at length positive experiences of guidance, as well as many types of problems that arose between them and their caseworkers.

In the Norwegian interviews, PES did not play as central a role as in the German ones. However, the Norwegian interviewees sometimes described themselves as having been “lucky” or “unlucky” with their caseworkers. This resembles the German stories. In Germany, conflicts often arose between the young interviewees and caseworkers due to fundamental differences between the aims of PES and the young people. Some described a feeling of being left alone by the employment office, while others told stories of being treated unreasonably. A common narrative in these cases was that caseworkers wanted to quickly integrate the young people in any kind of job, including temporary agency work. This approach clashed with the aspirations of the young individuals who wanted to pursue a set of personal, more long-term aims. Typically, they wanted to find a stable position in an occupational area they liked.

In many cases, the missing support or conflicting requirements of the employment office thwarted the proactive capacity of the young person. Annaliese (DE), for example, had finished vocational training in the area of commerce. When she found herself unemployed and in need of help, PES wanted her to find work in this sector. Annaliese was not happy with her profession after her first work experience. She wanted to start a second round of vocational training, but did not have the financial means to do so. Instead, PES proposed short-term jobs with temporary work agencies, which resulted in Annaliese feeling trapped in jobs with no future for her. PES would not support her aim of finding a long-term job.

Dieter and Gabriele (both DE) are further examples of young people whose aims differed from what PES offered them. However, as opposed to Annaliese, they kept actively trying to pursue their own goals even if they were different from what PES suggested. The difference between these examples shows that some individuals do manage to be proactive in spite of opposition from PES. While strong proactive capacities and persistence in the pursuit of own goals is helpful, it is not always possible to make choices that are independent of PES. For example, Dieter did not have the financial resources to become independent. Conversely, Gabriele represents a success story, illustrating that, in some, arguably exceptional cases, it is possible to follow one's own path without the support and against the advice of the PES. Gabriele wanted to become self-employed and applied for financial aid from the PES. In the end, she was not granted this support because the employment office wanted to place her fast in employment—the “placement priority.” Nonetheless, she eventually managed on her own, and, today, she successfully runs a business with a friend.

For young people in both countries, despite the differing activation regimes in Germany and Norway, the role of the caseworker is central in the guidance and counselling process. Different caseworkers with different counselling styles have varying effects as regards proactive and reactive capabilities.

In general, what the young people wanted was a personalised and flexible approach, one that took their current living situation, personal needs and aims into account. This approach seems to require devoting sufficient time to the counselling interview, as well as a certain attention and presence on the caseworkers' part during interactions. As Annaliese (DE) puts it:

Not such a lax thing, where the person, who sits in front of you, is only watching his PC, clicking at things and asking some things, but doesn't react to myself personally. This is something personalised such a job or a job placement. Simply not enough.

Those who have not received guidance, or inadequate guidance, point to this as one of the areas in which they hope to see improvement. Martin (NO) explains that he was given guidance that did not feel helpful. Rather laconically, he comments that

[...] it wasn't very often I felt it was helpful. They kept saying things you knew already, writing a CV is rather common-sense.

Martin's comments point to a common problem: that the courses and classes unemployed youth are offered by their caseworkers are often general and not tailored to individual needs. Such guidance will often feel like a waste of time and be counter-productive in the relationship between PES and those they serve.

Claudia (DE) was one of the interviewees who reported a very positive experience with her caseworkers because of their counselling approach: she was always asked what she wanted to do and what she was interested in. She could choose between different suggestions. Furthermore, her caseworker changed the type of support and the advisory style to suit Claudia's development. At the beginning of her period of unemployment, she received more extensive support, for example, for writing applications, and she could choose between the different options presented to her. Later, when she knew better what she wanted, had learned from her experiences and developed more self-confidence, she was left alone more often—which she perceived as helpful, too. For Claudia, there was a positive development from rather passive and reactive behaviour towards more proactive capabilities.

## 5.2 | Programmes and measures: Beneficial or detrimental

PES caseworkers may propose participation in an ALMP programme or measure. The purpose of these can be more in-depth counselling, training in specific skills, to gain work experience, to establish direct contact with employers and much more. Six of the Norwegian and half of the German interviewees spoke about participating in labour market programmes provided by PES or sub-contracted third parties.

Among different labour market programmes in Norway, the most used measure is "work training." The Norwegian stories about programme participation show that programmes can be both detrimental and beneficial to people's opportunities and behaviour, depending on how they influence self-confidence and motivation. Work training played a significant role in the stories of both Martin (NO) and Astrid (NO). Both had reduced work capacity because of impairment-related health problems. Nonetheless, they had completed formal education that made them qualified for work—Astrid had a vocational education in the field of health care and Martin had obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. At the time of the interview, Martin had been granted a disability pension and worked a few hours a week as a kitchen assistant. Astrid's story was one of being trapped in an endless cycle of work training: although she had placements that were relevant to her skills, the placements never helped her to secure a job. For both Martin and Astrid, work training was harmful to their self-confidence—they had started to question their skills—and this hampered their proactive capacities.

By contrast, Anne Karin (NO) spoke about one work training programme that seemed to have enhanced her skills. For her, this particular work training programme was an important conversion factor in her working life.



Participating in this course promoted her proactive capacity because it equipped her with improved social skills that were relevant to finding a part-time job and returning to school. Anne-Karin had dropped out of upper secondary education. Her mother took her to the PES, and Anne Karin was placed in two different work training measures. None of them matched her own interests. However, when she moved to a larger city, she was enrolled in a programme where she and other young people helped teachers with physical education of young pupils. Although her objective was not to become a teacher, Anne Karin was able to practise her social skills and play football, which she loved. With improved self-confidence, she applied for jobs in the retail trade and was given a part-time job that she still has. At the time of the interview, she was about to finish a special upper secondary school programme for students with mental health issues and had plans to pursue higher education.

The German interviewees also reported having participated in different measures or programmes suggested and financed by PES. In some cases, these programmes were very useful for the participant's development. But the effects of programme participation were not always directly measurable, such as immediately starting in an apprenticeship, a job or achieving an educational certificate. However, especially for young people with complex problems, participation in several measures led to step-by-step development. The programme participation often positively influenced their personal conversion factors and, in the long run, it sometimes led to a more proactive behavioural pattern in the young people. It increased their self-confidence, gave them a daily structure and work experience, helped them to develop career goals and increased their motivation to follow their personal aims.

Emilie (DE) is such an example. She had participated in three different educational measures that were suggested to her and financed by the PES. She dropped out of the first two measures due to family problems. After some years of parental leave, Emilie was participating in a third measure to prepare her for vocational training. As a part of this measure, she underwent an internship at a tattoo studio, which gave her new motivation and the possibility to obtain a secondary school certificate. She thought that, even though she did not freely choose the measures that she participated in, it helped give her a more realistic impression of different work areas and find out what she wanted.

Even though the two countries differ with respect to activation regimes, we can observe similar patterns in the effects of programmes and measures. Programmes are more likely to have positive effects on the proactive capacities of young people if they succeed in strengthening young people's self-confidence and if they help them to develop a vocational orientation or realistic, long-term career aims. They can especially function as important steppingstones towards new educational options. Surprisingly, it does not seem to be decisive that the young people have chosen the measures in question themselves.

### 5.3 | Cash benefits: Necessary, but conditional

In Germany as well as in Norway, young unemployed are entitled to cash benefits from PES, but they have to fulfil certain obligations to obtain them. In both countries, the majority of the interviewees received cash benefits, while more young Norwegians were living without financial support from PES. This is due to the fact that some of them—despite being unemployed—decided not to take advantage of the employment office's help. In the German interviews, it was notable that the specific conditions linked to the receipt of the benefits were addressed in detail by the young interviewees.

In Norway, the work assessment allowance that many of the young interviewees received is part of the activation scheme. In Astrid's (NO) story, this scheme did not contribute to building her social resilience. Instead, work training and the work assessment allowance appear to be a social conversion factor with a negative impact on Astrid's social resilience. After participating in several work training measures, all she wanted was to become a disability pension recipient. She was tired of being activated for activation's sake. She claimed that she needed a timeout to distance herself from PES for a time. She said that, if she could be provided with a disability pension, she would later apply for part-time jobs and—further down the road—work part-time. With a disability pension, she

would be better off financially, and perhaps be able to live on her own. Thus, paradoxically, in Astrid's story a disability pension was portrayed to potentially boost her proactive capacity, at least in the long term.

Most of the German interviewees received Unemployment Benefit II (see above) via the job centres during their periods of unemployment, but some also had experience of other benefits, such as the insurance-based Unemployment Benefit I or housing benefit. Describing Unemployment Benefit II, the German interviewees pointed to its demanding nature compared with other benefits. For instance, Adele (DE) characterised Unemployment Benefit II as generally helpful but tied to many obligations: "they always want something." In contrast, housing benefit "is not enough for living, but the housing benefit is more comfortable because you don't have this authority breathing down your neck and wanting something from you."

The quality of the placement proposals was an important topic for many of the German interviewees, who were required to apply for every job suggested by PES in form of a "proposal." They tended to be appreciative of the offers, but typically found the content of the proposals problematic. The job offers were often perceived as outdated or not matching their qualifications. Moreover, in many cases they only involved low-paid or short-term temporary agency work.

In their interaction with PES, many of the unemployed youth in Germany had problems with the bureaucratic system and rules linked to the receipt of Unemployment Benefit II, such as the extensive application process for the benefit and the complex procedures of PES itself. Sometimes, these hurdles led to frustration and demotivation. For others, bureaucratic hurdles were more severe and led to decreasing cooperation with PES on the young people's part. For Dieter (DE), the PES even became part of the "threat." Dieter had proactively started to look for an apprenticeship on his own and found a potential training place as a professional driver. A precondition for the apprenticeship was a driving licence, which Dieter could not pay for without the support of the PES. He needed to present quotes from three different driving schools to the PES to receive financing for the licence. At first, he only managed to present two proper quotes and, when he was ready to present the third one, it took a very long time before his caseworker had time for an appointment. In the end, he only had 30 days left to take his driving licence before the scheduled start of the apprenticeship. Dieter felt under pressure and did not manage to get his licence in this short time. He lost his potential training place as a result. As a sanction for not starting the apprenticeship, he lost his Unemployment Benefit II for 4 months. He was left with a EUR 200 so-called Minijob as his only source of income. He tried to appeal against the sanction, but his letter seemed to have got lost somewhere in the PES bureaucracy. In this context, he had to draw on his reactive capacity in order to create financial alternatives that compensated for the penalty imposed by PES.

In relation to the conditionality of benefits, we can observe some differences between the activation regimes in Germany and Norway. In Germany, young interviewees more openly question the usefulness of some of the conditions for receiving benefit. Especially the quality of the placement proposals instrument is discussed. In both regimes, cash benefits as such generally strengthened the reactive capacities of the young people. The benefits were an important financial resource for the interviewees. At the same time, the conditions for benefit receipt often had additional effects on personal conversion factors and sometimes even thwarted the proactive capacities of the young people. For some of the young people, unconditional benefits, such as disability pension in Norway or the housing benefit in Germany, were perceived as more attractive since they were an opportunity to take a timeout from "being activated." Hence, unconditional benefits sometimes seemed to be a better basis for the development of proactive capacities than conditional benefits, because they gave the recipients an opportunity to pursue their own life and career plans in an unhampered way.

## 5.4 | Sanctions: Potential or real threat

In both countries, sanctions such as benefit reductions can be imposed on young people receiving unemployment benefit. In the Norwegian system, sanctions are more of a theoretical threat rather than a lived reality: none of the

Norwegian interviewees had been sanctioned. In the German interviews, PES's practice of reducing cash benefits was much more present, and fundamentally determined the lives of some of the interviewees.

Especially for young people with few other financial resources to rely on, a sanction could lead to the risk of becoming homeless: Dieter (DE) described how he had been sanctioned several times, sometimes losing all of his Unemployment Benefit II. This situation led to a step-by-step reduction of Dieters' financial resources and a deterioration of his personal conversion factors, such as motivation and health. It was only the financial support of his family, friends and girlfriend that prevented Dieter from becoming homeless. This meant that Dieter had a constant need to replace or recover his previous resources and abilities, forcing him to rely on using his reactive capacities against the threat of benefit reduction. For Dieter, what many of the other interviewees described as a feeling of being "trapped" by PES was very real, and it directly hindered his potential proactive capacities and his efforts to live a life according to his visions and values.

Again, we can observe a difference between the two activation regimes. In Germany, the practice of sanctioning is much more present in the everyday lives of the young interviewees, while the impact can vary between individuals and with respect to the extent of the sanction. In particular, very strict sanctions, which include a reduction in housing benefit, can strongly hinder any proactive capacity in the young person. They become an additional threat to the young person in an already difficult situation.

## 6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The aim of this article was to explore young people's stories of whether PES strengthen their ability to find meaningful work. We have used a theoretical framework drawing on the concept of social resilience and the capability approach. Comparing German and Norwegian stories, we have seen how PES in both countries aim to help young individuals into employment, but that there are differences both in terms of the means used and the expected outcomes. Furthermore, although young people are more likely to perceive unemployment as an individual threat, PES—as public organisations—are more likely to perceive unemployment as a societal problem. Young people want to end their unemployment to increase their individual well-being, while PES might pursue larger societal aims, such as reducing public spending on unemployment benefit. This could lead to a strong preference by PES to "end unemployment by taking a job"—or, more specifically, "end unemployment by taking any kind of job." This does not necessarily correspond well with the personal long-term career aims of the youth themselves.

For the German interviewees, narrating their experiences of a placement priority system, the lack of a long-term perspective creates frustration. Our analysis shows that compulsory application for jobs suggested in placements proposals in the German system can lead to demotivation, thwarting proactive capacities and the informants' cooperation with PES. Supporting young people in their long-term aims may require more resources and time, but it would also integrate them more sustainably in the labour market and could prevent work-welfare cycling.

The interviews in both countries show that the personal relationship between the caseworkers and those they are trying to help is important. Even when the help offered is insufficient, the feeling that PES are doing their best is key for unemployed individual's motivation.

Particularly prominent in the Norwegian material were stories about young people in activation programmes who had been demotivated by being trapped in a cycle of programme participation, without this resulting in employment. This resonates with previous research findings that indicate that work training is not effective (Hyggen, 2017). For our interviewees, work training came across as "activation for activation's sake" (Walther, 2006, p. 132). They perceived disability pension as a way to break out of the cycle, to attain a higher amount of benefits and more freedom to seek other options. Such behavioural patterns are linked to the insufficient level of unemployment benefit for young people and they contribute to the medicalisation of labour market problems in Norway.

A central finding in our data is that, for some of the young people in both Norway and Germany, cash benefits that are not conditional on job-seeking, that is, the Norwegian disability pension and the German housing benefit,

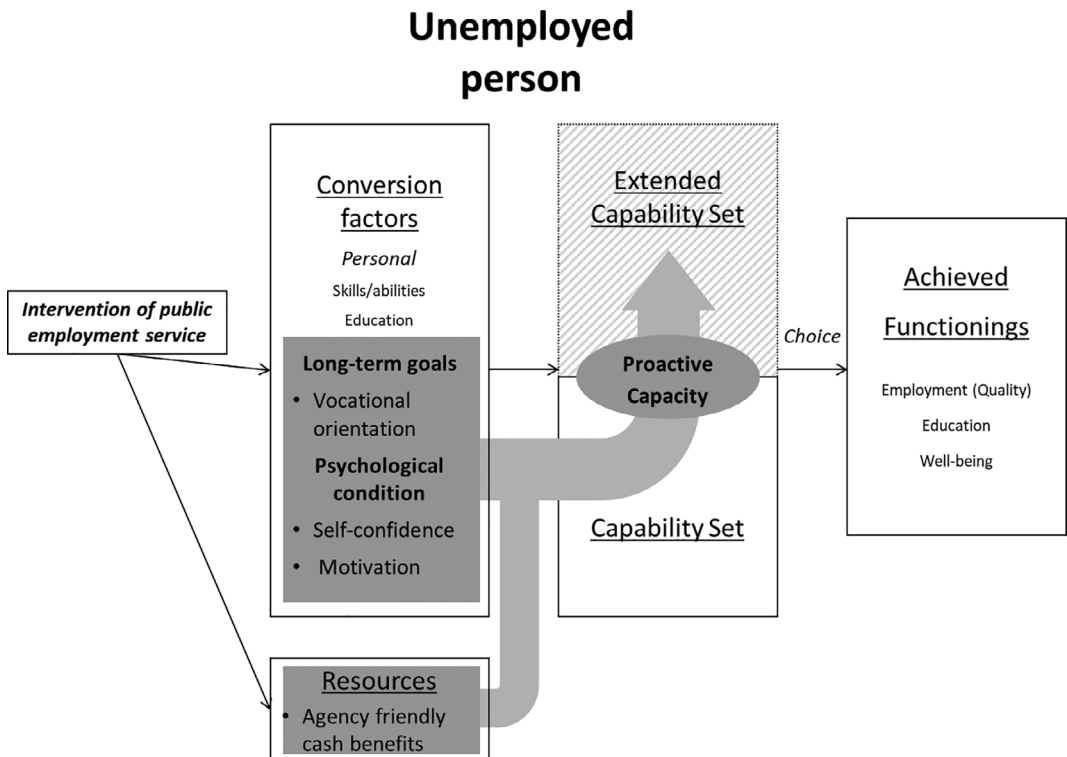
appear to be more helpful in terms of creating individual options than the benefits provided through the activating schemes. When conditions for receiving a benefit restrict agency, unconditional cash benefits appear to be more capability-friendly. From a government perspective, these cash benefits are reactive, but for some young people they support proactive capacities.

Compared to the Norwegian interview data, young Germans seem to feel put under undue pressure by PES. One reason is the difference between personal aims and the “placement priority” of PES, another is the more prominent experience of sanctions. The stories told by the young unemployed Germans show that, especially in the case of the 100% sanctions, PES risk losing contact with the young people and negatively affecting their proactive and reactive capacities. This is particularly the case when young people face complex problems and cannot rely on family and friends. The civic contractualism regime of the German PES thus seems to have some disadvantages compared to the autonomous citizens regime in Norway.

Although unemployment benefit is obviously important to maintaining a minimum of normal life when unemployed, the expected positive, proactive resilience-building aspect of PES intervention and activation policies is often lacking in the experience of the young interviewees. However, some approaches and procedures could be identified in our data that can lead to more positive outcomes.

Our analysis identifies certain personal conversion factors in young people that play a decisive role in the development of their proactive capacities, which help them to actively extend their capability sets. These are long-term goals, for example, in form of vocational orientation, as well as self-confidence and motivation, as seen in Figure 1.

Based on these findings, we argue that the counselling approach taken by the caseworkers should be personalised and based on a long-term perspective that is sensitive to the strong role that the motivation of young people plays in building social resilience and, in particular, their proactive capacities. Our findings concerning the



**FIGURE 1** Public employment services building proactive capacities

guidance and counselling process are in line with findings from scholars engaged in research on the concepts of individualisation and personalisation in active labour market policy, who call for “differentiated, flexible and tailor-made provisions” and a “reciprocal and client-oriented approach, realizing the primary aim of enabling citizens to take charge of their own lives” (Valkenburg, 2007, p. 27). As “meaningless” placements seem to do more harm than good and decrease social resilience, it is crucial that young people are involved in the choice of programmes and measures during the counselling process. If they clearly understand why certain alternatives are rejected or suggested, this could build a cooperative attitude in the individual and support proactive capacities. The necessary time for explanations, questions and reflection should be taken during interactions. Bureaucratic hurdles can become major problems for unemployed youth who are in contact with PES and can make them miss out on important educational or career opportunities.

Based on our analysis, we conclude that the concept of social resilience does indeed add to the capability approach, because it enables a dynamic perspective on the development of people's capabilities. Thus, it makes it possible to better analyse how society can truly provide help for self-help. If public support was able to specifically address the conversion factors that are decisive for building social resilience, it could help people to proactively widen their capability sets and create better future options on their own.

Social resilience needs to be understood not as an innate personal trait, but as a proactive or reactive capacity of people, which can be supported or even destroyed by society. Hence, PES in both Norway and Germany need to adapt their strategies to ensure that they are really helping young people to find meaningful work, not becoming another threat in often already difficult life situations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Mi Ah Schoyen for suggestions and comments.

This work is an outcome of the Project “NEGOTIATE—Negotiating early job-insecurity and labour market exclusion in Europe,” which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Societal Challenge 6, H2020-YOUNG-SOCIETY-2014, YOUNG-1-2014, Research and Innovation Action (RIA), under grant agreement No 649395.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## ORCID

Marie-Luise Assmann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3468-264X>

Ida Tolgensbakk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9580-6992>

Kjetil K. Böhler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2926-5673>

## REFERENCES

- Assmann, M.-L., Steinberg, L. & Dingeldey, I. (2017). Strategies to improve labour market integration of young people: *Comparing policy coordination in nine European countries - Country report Germany, Bremen* (NEGOTIATE Deliverable Nr. 8.2).
- Bartelheimer, P., Verd, J. M., Lehweß-Litzmann, R., López-Andreu, M., & Schmidt, T. (2012). Unemployment, intervention and capabilities. A comparative study of Germany and Spain. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 18(1), 31–44.
- Beitz, C. R. (2011). *The idea of human rights*, New York: . Oxford University Press.
- Bell, D. N. F., & Blanchflower, D. G. (2011). Young people and the great recession. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 27(2), 241–267.
- BMAS (2017). Zielvereinbarungen zwischen dem Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales und der Bundesagentur für Arbeit zur Erreichung der Ziele der Grundsicherung für Arbeitssuchende im Jahr 2017: SGB II-ZielVbg 2017.
- Bonvin, J.-M., & Orton, M. (2009). Activation policies and organisational innovation: The added value of the capability approach. *International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy*, 29(11/12), 565–574.

- Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2014). Chancen ergreifen im Arbeitsbündnis Jugend und Beruf. *Sozialleistungsträger kooperieren - Junge Menschen profitieren*. Nürnberg.
- Bussi M. (2016). Straightjacket and stepping stones. Exploring institutional ability to develop employability of young people. PhD thesis, Unpublished manuscript, University of Geneva, Switzerland.
- Bussi, M., Schoyen, M. A., Vedeler, J. S., O'Reilly, J., McDonnell, A., & Lewis, C. (2019). Social resilience in facing precarity: Young people 'rising to the occasion'. In B. Hvinden, J. O'Reilly, M. A. Schoyen, & C. Hyggen (Eds.), *Negotiating early job insecurity. Well-being, scarring and resilience of European youth*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Cappelen, C. (2009). Arbeidsledighetstrygd: Likhet og personlig ansvar. *Norsk Statsvitenskapelig Tidsskrift*, 25(01), 31–56.
- Chevalier, T. (2015). Varieties of youth welfare citizenship: Towards a two-dimension typology. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 26(1), 3–19.
- Chung, H., & Van Oorschot, W. (2011). Institutions versus market forces: Explaining the employment insecurity of European individuals during (the beginning of) the financial crisis. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 21(4), 287–301.
- Dagdeviren, H., Donoghue, M., & Promberger, M. (2016). Resilience, hardship and social conditions. *Journal of Social Policy*, 45(1), 1–20.
- David, H., & John, B. T. (1989). *Social theory of modern societies: Anthony Giddens and his critics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dingeldey, I., Assmann, M., & Steinberg, L. (2017). *Strategies to improve labour market integration of young people: Comparing policy coordination in nine European countries: NEGOTIATE working paper 8.2*. Oslo, Norway: NOVA.
- Eichhorst, W., Grienberger-Zingerle, M., & Konle-Seidl, R. (2008). Activation policies in Germany: From status protection to basic income support. In Eichhorst, et al. (Eds.), *Bringing the jobless into work?* Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Fimreite, A. L., Christensen, T., & Læg Reid, P. (2012). *Joined-up-government: Reform challenges, experiences and accountability relations*. Bergen, Norway: Uni Rokkan Centre.
- Hammer, T. (2007). Labour market integration of unemployed youth from a life course perspective: The case of Norway. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 16(3), 249–257.
- Heidenreich, M., & Aurich-Beerheide, P. (2014). European worlds of inclusive activation. The organisational challenges of coordinated service provision. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 23(3), 6–22.
- Hyggen, C. (2017). Etterlater arbeidstrening arr hos unge ledige? Et vignett-eksperiment av arbeidsgiveres beslutninger ved ansettelse av unge i Norge [Does work training scar young unemployed?]. *Søkelys på Arbeidslivet*, 34(4), 236–251.
- Jacobi, D., & Mohr, K. (2007). Rushing towards employability-centred activation: The "Hartz reforms" in Germany. In R. van Berkel & B. Valkenburg (Eds.), *Making it personal: Individualising activation services in the EU*. Bristol, England: Policy Press.
- Jantz, B. (2017). Public sector reform and accountability dynamics: The changing welfare administration in Norway and Germany. In T. Christensen & P. Læg Reid (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook to accountability and welfare state reforms in Europe* (pp. 75–89). Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Keck, M., & Sakdapolrak, P. (2013). What is social resilience? Lessons learned and ways forward. *Erdkunde*, 67(1), 5–19.
- Kvist, J., Fritzell, J., Hvinden, B., & Kangas, O. (2011). *Changing social equality*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative analysis: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.
- Lindholm, Ø. T., Tolgensbakk, I. and Vedeler, J. S. (2016). Strategies to improve labour market integration of young people: Comparing policy coordination in nine European countries—National report Norway.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*, New York: Sage.
- NAV (2013). Visjon og verdier [Visions and values] Retrieved from <https://www.nav.no/no/nav-og-samfunn/om-nav/fakta-om-nav/kva-er-nav/visjon-og-verdier>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2009). *Hiding from humanity: Disgust, shame, and the law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Obrist, B., Pfeiffer, C., & Henley B. (2010). Multi-layered social resilience. *Progress in Development Studies*, 10(4), 283–293.
- OECD. (2018). *Investing in youth: Norway*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.
- Olofsson, J. (2008). *Ungdomars väg från skola till arbetsliv: nordiska erfarenheter*, København: Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Otto, H. U., Atzmüller, R., Berthet, T., Bifulco, L., Bonvin, J. M., Chiappero-Martinetti, E., ... Schröer, R. (2015). *Facing trajectories from school to work. Towards a capability-friendly youth policy in Europe*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Pascual, A. S. (2007). *Reshaping welfare states: Activation regimes in Europe*. Saltza. *Work and society no 54*. Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang.
- Robeyns, I. (2005). The Capability Approach: A theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(1): 93–117.
- Rønsen, M., & Skarøhamar, T. (2009). 'Do welfare-to-work initiatives work? Evidence from an activation programme targeted at social assistance recipients in Norway', *Journal of European Social Policy* 19: 61–77.
- Robeyns, I. (2016). Capabilitarianism. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(3), 397–414.

- Schoyen, M. A., & Vedeler, J. S. (2016). *Institutional determinants of early job insecurity in nine European countries—Country report NORWAY*. NEGOTIATE Working Paper 3.4, August. Oslo, Norway: NOVA Norwegian Social Research.
- Schreyer, F., Zahradnik, F., & Götz, S. (2012). Lebensbedingungen und Teilhabe von jungen sanktionierten Arbeitslosen im SGB II. *Sozialer Fortschritt*, 61(9), 213–220.
- Sen, A. (1992). *Inequalities reexamined*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Sen, A. (1993). Capability and well-being. In M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds.), *The quality of life* (pp. 30–53). Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. London, England: Allen Lane.
- Squire, C. (2008). Experience-centred and culturally-oriented approaches. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 41–63). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Statistics Norway. (2016). Uføre. Retrieved from <https://www.ssb.no/en/sosiale-forhold-og-kriminalitet/statistikker/ufore>.
- Susanne Gottuck, S., & Otto, H.-U. (2014). Editorial: Creating Capabilities for Socially Vulnerable Youth in Europe. *Social Work and Society*. International Online Journal. 12(2).
- Thuy, P., Hansen, E., & Price, D. (2001). *The public employment service in a changing labour market*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization.
- Valkenburg, B. (2007). Individualizing activation services: Trashing out an ambiguous concept. In R. van Berkel & B. Valkenburg (Eds.), *Making it personal: Individualising activation services in the EU* (pp. 25–41). Bristol, England: Policy Press.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions. Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, 14(2), 119–139.

**How to cite this article:** Assmann M-L, Tolgensbakk I, Vedeler JS, Bøhler KK. Public employment services: Building social resilience in youth? *Soc Policy Adm*. 2020;1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12649>