Introduction

My PhD project studies job search behaviour in the interplay between cognitive, psychological, and socio-economic characteristics of the unemployed individuals (Sebald & Nielsen 2016; Chetty 2015). Rather than assuming that humans are “predictably irrational” (Ariely 2008), the project argues that behaviour, appearing irrational, deviant, or passive from a policy perspective, might be rather rational under certain circumstances (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea 2017). The aim is therefore to use behavioural insights from cognitive and social psychology to better comprehend the antecedents of suboptimal decision-making of unemployed individuals, and investigate ways in which unemployment policy schemes can better address their target groups. To test these claims, I do not rely directly on qualitative methods – whether it being interviews, document analysis, or observations – as my primary research method. Rather, I will utilize survey, natural, and field experiments to make causal claims regarding the behavioural antecedents of job search decision-making among unemployed individuals. Hence, I design my research with techniques that are typically less associated with qualitative research and more with applied statistics and experimental design, such as random sampling, treatment design, and randomization inference. However, my project is still highly reliant on qualitative methods as they play a key supporting role in the research I am planning to make (Brymann 2016). In the following, I will focus on two ways in which I will use qualitative methods during my PhD.

Getting insights into a new field

I utilize qualitative methods when making tentative interviews with civil servants – both managers, administrators, and front line workers - in Danish unemployment insurance funds and job centers. These interviews serve to improve the reliability and validity of my research while simultaneously giving me a better grip of how they understand their role as e.g. caseworkers or job counsellors. With these interviews, I thereby approach the civil servants as a source of knowledge and an object of analysis (Harvey 2011; Lancaster 2017).

First, I have tentatively attempted to test whether they find my topic of research interesting, valid, and useful by simply stating my research interests and hearing their thoughts on it with their knowledge on unemployed individuals in mind. On a very basic level, this provides an
early, yet important reality check that helps me drop poor research ideas, while simultaneously improving others.

Secondly, I use the interviews to understand how they perceive and handle their administrative discretion. How do they cope with the legal and administrative framework they are working with? How do they adjust these formal demands with the needs of the unemployed individuals? What do they identify as their clients’ barriers to employment? Do they believe that the policies they are enforcing are effective, too flexible, or too rigid? By conducting these interviews at a very early stage of my PhD, I have gotten a much better understand of why case workers, even within the same organization, have very different ways of understanding and handling their administrative discretion. More importantly, I found that their knowledge of their clients’ successful and failed job search behaviours is often ‘stuck’ at the front line and, thus, remains tacit to the rest of the organization. This explains why asking the same questions about ‘what works’ to managers further up in e.g. an unemployment insurance fund provides quite different answers than when asking job counselors at the front. This allows me to identify the knowledge gaps among practitioners and researchers alike that merits further investigation.

Making empirically founded claims

Secondly, a key pillar of my project is how individuals seek to cope with sources of stress, e.g. unemployment. However, due to lack of research interest, methodological limitations, or practical feasibility, there are only very few quantitative studies on the (subjective) experiences of unemployed individuals. Instead, a large majority of studies on social welfare recipients’ job-related coping strategies in the face of economic hardship from living on unemployment benefits stem from interviews. While this data brings substantial and very detailed insights into such issues, they are – for good reasons – seldom directly concerned with establishing causal relations between unemployment benefit levels, coping strategies, and job search behaviour. A central claim in much of this research is, however, that the individuals’ coping strategies potentially confounds the relationship between unemployment and job search. Consequently, I wish to transfer these insights into a quantitative experimental framework to study questions like: Why is it that some individuals cope with unemployment by searching a lot while others only search little and move further away from the job market? Are coping strategies static or are they dynamically affected by the actual
experience of being unemployed? However, to make sure that I study this as precise as possible, I rely heavily on qualitative methods:

First, I use qualitative interviews to improve my operationalization of complex unemployment experiences into a series of single items in a survey question battery. While I could just rely on the few existing survey batteries on generalized coping strategies question, this research often stems from non-Danish contexts that are not directly transferrable into a Danish setting. Translating the items into a Danish context is crucial as the average conditions of unemployed individuals can change drastically from country to country. Hence, it is very important to validate the operationalization of the items through interviews with individuals from the target group, and crosscheck with existing qualitative studies on Danes on unemployment insurance (Holstein & Gubrium 2003).

Secondly, I use interviews to improve the exact operationalization of the treatment variables that I develop for my experiments. As an experiment essentially seeks to study the effects of a manipulated independent variable on a dependent variable while holding everything else constant, the independent variable must be carefully designed. Most importantly, it helps improve the precision of the estimate as an experiment with a misguided intervention easily blurs the estimates, causes unintended effects, or – even worse – turns completely irrelevant. During this design phase, I am obviously guided by theoretical insights from e.g. cognitive psychology. However, as I strive to test context-specific claims, it is vital that the experimental design maintains a high level of ecological validity. Therefore, the interventions have to be designed to fit every day life of the target group and appear as realistic as possible. To reach this goal, I will not only make interviews with experts on the field, but also individuals from the target group (Plesner 2011).

References:


