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Social Construction of Relations to the
Institution of Unemployment

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Keeping the/at a distance. An analysis of the social construction of relations to the institution of unemployment

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In analysing the relationship between the State and the individuals it governs, the social sciences have focused on the professional side of the street level bureaucracy or on the interactions that take place there. This study therefore proposes to broaden the focus usually adopted and to question the relationships and expectations that jobseekers have with regard to the Public Employment Service (PES), a central institution of the welfare state: how do jobseekers perceive it? Are these perceptions marked by the dialectic of rights and duties currently in force within the PES? And what effects do they have on the expectations and attitudes of the unemployed, both towards employment and towards the institution?

Following the Foucauldian analysis of governmentality that consider the people are not the simply recipients of public action, we are seeking to understand the relationships they have constructed with it. Our survey enables us to analyse the effects of this government of behaviour when individuals have internalised the norms and responsibilities - particularly in terms of activation - specific to their situation. It provides at least a partial answer to the question of how the governed cope with the mismatch between institutional discourse and actual practice.

Keywords: Unemployment; institution; control; support; activation; street-level bureaucracy

From the various polemics about unfilled job vacancies to those about the profiteers, the questioning of the unemployed is a regular occurrence. This age-old criticism is also part of a contemporary concept of individuals as entrepreneurs of their own destinies, constantly called upon to demonstrate their dynamism. This ideal vision is part of a dual performativity. Firstly, citizens, like politicians and public decision-makers, are called upon to take a position on an issue that is seen as fundamental to social cohesion. Then, there is the need to regulate,

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monitor and even punish breaches. While journalists regularly take up the subject, and help to legitimise it, sociologists have for the last ten years or so focused on the issue of control in their work, whether they are focusing on jobseekers (Demazière, 2018), advisers (Lavitry, 2015 ; Clouet and Pillon, 2017), the institution in charge of unemployment (Pillon and Vives, 2018; Vives and al., 2023) or, more broadly, the recipients of the welfare state (Dubois, 2021). However, control and sanctions in the event of non-compliance occupy a relatively low place in the French law, compared to other missions. Reception, information, guidance and support are structural aspects of the institution's missions, as are unemployment benefits and the prescription of services "useful for developing their professional skills and improving their employability". This article therefore proposes to broaden the focus usually adopted and to question the relationships and expectations that jobseekers have with regard to a central institution of the welfare state and its employment and labour market regulation policy: how do jobseekers perceive the PES? What is their relationship with the people who run it? Are these perceptions, and the representations and behaviour that result from them, marked by the dialectic of rights and duties in force within the PES?

Far from focusing on an analysis of performance, our aim is to understand the nature of the relationship between the unemployed and the institution - here mediated by the advisers - by shedding light on it from the point of view of the unemployed. How do these relationships develop? And what effects do they have on the expectations and attitudes of the unemployed, both towards employment and towards the institution?

This set of questions makes it possible to examine what Vincent Dubois has described as administrative relationship (2019, 2003). Drawing on work such as that of Anne Revillard (2019), which links awareness of social rights and administrative relations, we are interested in the point of view of the recipients of public action (Sarfati, 2017), and hence in the treatment to which they are subjected and their own perceptions of that treatment. As the

issue of non-use of social policies has emerged in recent years (Warin, 2014), it seems important to us to turn our attention to those who make a request to the administration, and thus seek to understand how the response provided is perceived.

The sociology of the street-level bureaucracy very early on used the notion of relationships to describe the exchanges between professionals and users. For Jean-Marc Weller (1990), these relationships are part of a regulatory movement that never sees the user as powerless in front of the counter. For Alexis Spire (2007), as for Vincent Dubois (2021), one of the dimensions of the relationship is the distance between the institution and the individual. In this respect, Vincent Dubois refers to a double distance to account simultaneously for the distance between users and the "norms and expectations of institutions", and the social distance between users and professionals. Finally, the notion of distance covers a physical and material dimension as well as a symbolic one, as in the case of telephone relations between bureaucrats and users (Weller, 1997).

In addition, because they adopt a methodology based essentially on observations, a large proportion of studies on street-level bureaucracy have considered these relationships from an interactionist angle, documenting the State in concrete terms, i.e. in the materiality of exchanges between agents and users. However, there is a regular tendency to focus more specifically on one side of the counter, in order to grasp the workings and actions of *street-level bureaucrats*. But because they focus precisely on the professional's perspective, these studies tend to leave in the shade a set of situations in which relationships are marked by the absence of concrete exchanges or, at the very least, just a few.

Thus, far from considering the recipients to be mere receptacles of public action, we are seeking to understand the relationships they have constructed with it. Foucauld's analysis of governmentality is a particularly heuristic proposition here, in that it underlines the possibility of a government of conduct that nonetheless allows individuals a form of rationality of their

own. It operates through mechanisms that produce "the illusion of invisible control [...] over social behaviour" (Jeanpierre, 2018); and it is within this framework that the rationality of the governed is limited. Our survey thus enables us to analyse the effects of this government of behaviour when individuals have internalised the norms and responsibilities - particularly in terms of activation - specific to their situation. It provides at least a partial answer to the question of how the governed deal with the mismatch between institutional discourse and actual practice.

In order to shed light on these issues, we conducted a qualitative study consisting of 41 semi-structured interviews with unemployed people registered with Pôle emploi (20 women and 21 men). Aged between 21 and 66, they said they had been registered for between 1 month and 20 years.

In this article, we distinguish three categories of relationship with the institution, and relate them to the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals making them up (1). We then show that these relationships with the institution are likely to evolve over time, as a result of institutional pathways (2) and discourses (3). Ultimately, the article reveals a disjunction between the promises made by the institution and the expectations of the unemployed.

1 The other side of the Street-Level Bureaucracy: Relationships with the institution through the eyes of the unemployed

In the following section, we propose an analysis of the relationship between jobseekers and PES based on the idea of distance - whether socio-technical, symbolic, social or political - by distinguishing three categories of relationship to the institution. We will see that relationships with the institution are partly a function of the respondents' relationships with employment

and work, which depend on their positions, resources and experiences, all of which help to shape the way in which the support offered - or not - is received.

1.1 Feeling cared of

Some respondents described a feeling of being taken care of, reflecting a close relationship with the institution, which is based on various factors that may combine. Firstly, for these jobseekers, contact with their adviser or agency is relatively recent or regular.

"[With the advisers] it went very well [...]. I used to know my advisor, he helped me, he helped me very well [...]. [He calls me up from time to time and says: "Are you busy, are you...? But now, every month I update my details, and he scans my payslip, so he knows I'm working. But I don't need it too much. He... He used to post me papers at home, before... before, when I started."

(Tatiana, aged 35, 24 months registration)⁴

While the frequency of contact is important, it does not entirely determine distance from the institution, as the feeling of closeness can remain thanks to the link established at the outset. In fact, the feeling of being taken care of comes down to feeling listened to, understood and considered, in terms of needs and constraints.

"She takes my calls, listens to me, remembers me and what I told her at my last interview. So that's great. [...] I've had telephone conversations with her, let's say, practically once every three months... [...] I explained my case to her, my problem with the schedule... that's it, my children, why I can't do things differently. She suggested training courses, she advised me about a number of jobs other than in industry, she said: "If that would interest you...". And that was it. She pointed me in the direction of training courses... so that I could qualify. So, thanks to her, I got a job on a professional contract at the Post Office. [...] That's why I say, honestly, no, no, the

⁴ In addition to the respondent's anonymised first name and age, the declared duration of registration with PES is also given.

counsellor I have is perfect, she's perfect. [...] She takes into account... My schedule, my problems with my children, so...". (Amina, aged 39, 10 months registration)

The feeling of being taken care of by the institution is therefore not only due to the density of the exchanges, but also to the perception that the advisers are available and that they provide support tailored to their situation, enabling them to familiarise themselves with how the institution works:

Fanta (aged 25, 16 months registration) says she talks less and less to her adviser but is satisfied: "I've got my job, I don't need to! Because when we left, he asked me everything I wanted, we worked on my CV, and he told me to let him know if I found a job, to send him an email, to...". She once wrote to him about a problem with sending documents: "He told me to call, and he told me how to... blah, blah, blah... which department to call. I think it was for my benefit and all that. In fact, she often went to the jobcentre until an agent there helped her install the app she now uses systematically to declare her situation.

For example, having an advisor who listens and responds gives an impression of closeness, even when the support is ad hoc and does not lead directly to employment. However, this feeling of being taken care of is in the minority among the respondents, and those who report it share characteristics which, taken together, point to a dominated relationship towards employment and work, as well as limited social integration with regard to professional, friendship, family or association networks. All of these factors are likely to influence their relationship with the institution and its responses.

The people expressing a feeling of being taken care of are often low-skilled and left school early: Amina and Maria stopped their studies and started work at the age of 17. Fanta and Tatiana dropped out of school before the end of their secondary education and began working as teenagers for their families in Congo and Romania respectively. Their careers were thus marked by activity and employment; only two stopped working for several years to bring up their children. Even though they had been registered with the PES for a long

time (the shortest period is 16 months), all of them explained that they remained registered during the employment period out of fear of what the future might bring, a feeling that is socially situated.

This category of respondents works in occupations at the lower end of the socio-professional scale (catering, cleaning, transport, logistics), in difficult working conditions that are often conducive to violence in the workplace. They all report situations of conflict, harassment, exhaustion, etc., like Fanta, who, along with a colleague, left her job as a chambermaid because of harassment by their manager:

" I couldn't stand staying there. I pushed so hard at one point that... I started to feel sick to my stomach, because she was creating false stories about me, that I spoke badly to customers... it was all false and untrue" (Fanta, aged 25, 16 months registration).

This violence can also be linked to the fact that most of them are racialised (Gallot et al., 2020), with several reporting experiences of discrimination, such as the racist remarks made by Fanta's boss. However, all of them showed a certain resistance, mentioning this violence only half-heartedly, briefly or at the very end of the interview.

Finally, this type of relationship with the institution is developed, for the most part, by women. For the latter, the experience of domination at work and in employment (Maruani, 2017) echoes situations of marital dependence (Avril et al., 2019): Maria says she has to declare the amount of each of her purchases to her husband; Tatiana's ex-husband forbade her to work and leave the house after she joined him in France; Amina depends on her husband's income alone and fears for her retirement:

"When my youngest daughter went back to school, I said to myself: well, it's about time I started working again, so I'll at least have something... I was already starting to think about retirement. [...] It's because I'm turning 40, and I say to myself: well, in my life I've only worked for ten years, and even then, not even that. So I tell myself I'm not going to get anything when I retire, that's

all. That's it, so... that's why I say to myself: "It would be nice for me, personally, when I'm a bit older, to have an income of my own". (Amina, 39 years, 10 months registration)

Proximity to the institution is, in this case, linked to the fact that women are more familiar with the offices of the welfare state: as they are subject to particular forms of protection (Loison-Leruste and Perrier, 2019; Serre 2017), they are also more willing to seek help (Perrin-Heredia, 2013).

In short, their self-sacrifice in employment and job-seeking, combined with the relative lack of resources and support relationships available to these jobseekers, are likely to reinforce the place and role held by the institution for them, leading them to rely on it. Whether they are facing restrictive, discriminatory or violent situations, going through the PES is seen as an opportunity to change the course of their lives, to break out of isolation and/or dependency. As a result, jobseekers are less distanced from the institution and their relationship with it is more meaningful.

1.2 Feeling left out

A second type of relationship with the institution was identified by respondents who reported a feeling of distance, which they unanimously deplored. As with the first type of relationship with the institution, which this one clearly opposes, several common elements emerge. Firstly, jobseekers who felt left out regretted the lack, or inadequacy, of contact with the institution, and more specifically with their advisor. Symptomatically, they don't know the names of the representatives and refer to them as "they", indicating the nebulous and distant nature of the institution's representatives.

"No, they don't even phone me, nothing at all; I have my counsellor, but I don't know who she is... I ask for an appointment, but she never gives me one...". (Asma, aged 50, 20 months registration)

In contrast to the jobseekers who feel cared of, here the counsellors' attentiveness seems to be lacking. More generally, the institution's ability to understand their situation is questioned.

"For me, it's... that they make sure that... that they don't leave people, how shall I put it, in the shit, I don't know the word if it's the right one or not, but... to help people, that they help them because that's their job, it's... That's it, I think that... there's a need to listen. Listen and try to find solutions for the people who call on them. That's all" (Sofiane, aged 66, 12 months registration)

The frequency of the interviews with the advisers is not enough to account for the disappointments reported by the respondents. More broadly, it is the inability to even listen to them that gives rise to this feeling of being sidelined. Ultimately, this category of jobseekers seems to be constructed as a negative of the first. Where the firsts report appropriate and constructive exchanges, those who feel left out emphasise the indifference to which they are subjected.

While the relationship to the institution of the respondents in this group differs greatly from that of the first category, they have similar traits, which suggests on the one hand that distance from the institution is a composite and complex social construct, and on the other, that the experience of unemployment shapes the relationship to the institution at least as much as socio-professional position.

Like the firsts, these respondents all come from the working classes. Most of them left school without any qualifications and had an early and chaotic entry into the labour market, like Sofiane who has been working since he was 16:

"I've done quite a few jobs, I've worked in catering, I've worked in bars, in construction, in advertising; I've done quite a few jobs and internal training in companies." (Sofiane, aged 66, 12 months registration)

As for Mohammed, he left school "a year before the baccalaureate" in Morocco. He then tried to sign up for a training course, but had to give up because he had "no money to continue my studies", and moved from one country to another:

"I was in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. And then I went back to Morocco, [...] I went to Italy, then to Spain and then I came to France [...] to look for work". (Mohammed, aged 51, 5 registration)

These jobseekers have also been registered with PES. However, some, like Sélim, have only been registered for a few months (six), and are in employment at the time of the interview. Keeping their registration with PES is as much a safeguard against the setbacks associated with short-term jobs ("I'm staying registered just in case, if I really lose my job"), as it is a way of reaffirming that one's desired job (Demazière & Zune, 2018), in this case a permanent contract, constitutes a horizon in its own right.

In fact, another point that brings together those who say they have been sidelined and those who have been taken care of is the difficult working and employment conditions. Sofiane's working conditions led him, during the interview, to mention "crazy, black ideas that come into your head"; Yassine said he suffered from a lack of solidarity at work and felt he had a "pitiful working life"; Pierre was downgraded and had one short contract after another with the same company.

What's more, most of those who feel left out are men. This distinction in terms of gender can be read in the light of the predominance of a norm of professional success among men, which in this case were disappointed, but also in relation to the fact that women are more often in charge of administrative matters within households and are more acculturated to the codes of the institution (Guionnet & Neveu, 2021).

1.3 Expressing agreement on distance

For jobseekers in the last type of relationship identified, the distance with the institution may be the subject not of a denunciation but of an agreement. The jobseekers do not complain that they had few exchanges with the institution, quite the contrary. Anne-Françoise, for example, has never seen her adviser more than once a year since she became unemployed, while Laura and Martin only had one appointment when they registered, five and six months before our interview. The limited number of contacts appear to be the product of an agreement between jobseekers and the institution, at the end of what appears to be a negotiation between the two parties.

Without denying the asymmetry of the situation - between an individual and an institution, even when it is embodied by a single adviser - some respondents insist on highlighting the acceptable nature of this agreement.

"In any case, I look for myself, that's all. After that, the counsellor... I don't know if it's really any use. Afterwards, she doesn't give me advice, she gives me good advice, that's all, she tells me... That's all, after... I didn't say much to her. But afterwards, I know what to do" (Anne-Françoise, aged 58, 3 months registration)

Feeling that you know how to look for a job independently and, above all, giving this impression to your advisor builds an agreement between the two parties. This was the case for Laura, whose advisor suggested she wait "six months, a year, [to see if her business start-up project] works or not":

"And basically, we agreed... In the end, she agreed that I could manage, that she couldn't give me any help, because in fact she didn't know anything about this field. At the very least, if she saw training courses coming up, etc., she wouldn't hesitate to pass it on to me, which she does from time to time." (Martin, aged 37, 9 months registration)

Everyone agrees that it is appropriate for both parties to build a relationship based on distance.

The advisers, whose daily activities are known to be heavy and rationalised (Clouet and Pillon, 2017), gain useful time in these agreements to look after other people. Jobseekers, for their part, are able to focus on their work without "wasting time" with the institution and without "wasting the time" of an adviser whom they know to be very busy with other jobseekers who are less well equipped. Both parties agree, aware that distance is a guarantee of mutual savings in time, and even efficiency.

"Well, in fact, I'm looking for work... with a disability, but with the ability to work. Well, she [i.e. the advisor] knows the situation, that there are constraints. In other words, after that... she leaves the search to me. I've had two or three meetings with her, to do some... to see where things were at, so I've brought her a little bit of the topo and so on. So she said to me: "Yes, well that's fine, you do what's necessary according to your constraints". But then, well, same thing, I'm 50 years old, and I've got one hell of a problem... [laughs] I'm accumulating things that aren't easy. Not impossible, but not simple. (Alain, aged 50, 5 years registration)

Alain's situation was not suited to an organisation dedicated to the mass treatment of jobseekers, and led his adviser to explicitly suggest that she reduce her involvement, to which he agreed.

The respondents who expressed this type of relationship differed in several respects from those who denounced this distance or, on the contrary, had a feeling of closeness. First of all, gender and age are not structuring criteria, this group being made up of the youngest (Laura is 21), oldest (Anne-Françoise is 58) or middle-aged (Martin is 37) unemployed. While it is the heterogeneity of this group that is striking at first glance, its diversity is nonetheless a structuring feature. Especially as it combines a number of dimensions: none of them is racialised and all have a degree.

However, these characteristics and resources do not exempt them from the forms of violence in employment that many of the respondents described. Whether or not they were trying to escape this violence, most of them are setting up their own businesses. In recent years, sociological literature has documented the irresistible rise of discourse on the quest for independence, driven by policies to encourage business start-ups (Abdelnour & Lambert, 2020; Chambard, 2020). Initially promoted by the public authorities, these discourses are above all mobilised by those who are sociologically closest to independence, although they are increasingly heard and appropriated by workers without those resources but who are keen to break away from salaried subordination (Bernard, 2020). Despite a diploma in personal care and services, Laura was unable to get into nursing school and started a job in a supermarket. After 3 years, she realised that "it's a job that's more tiring than you'd think, [in which] you have to take a lot out of yourself...", so she asked for a break to set up as a self-employed estate agent. In practice, she works on a commission basis for a single agency. The possibility of receiving unemployment benefit of €713 while waiting to actually sell properties and receive commission convinced her to go for it. Laura agreed with her advisor that she would see him again after a period of six months to a year.

In addition to business start-ups, an agreement on distance can also be reached in situations where support does not seem useful to improve a situation. Anne-Françoise, a childcare assistant, has been registered with PES for over twenty years, and continues to update her situation to receive additional income when she doesn't have enough children. She doesn't feel any need for help from her adviser:

"But afterwards, I know how to do it, so... Afterwards, I... I've been doing this for 27 years, that's it... Afterwards, it's on my own, I go to Top Nounou, and then I look at what's there, I click, and then that's it... I go to Top Nounou. Anyway, I'm well known, so I'm at the... at the nursery

school relay, I do all that. I'm at the town hall, I'm... that's it", (Anne-Françoise, aged 58, 20 years registration)

As creators of their own activities or involved in specific employment systems that are unfamiliar to PES staff or difficult to overcome, the respondents in this category demonstrate resources and situations that enable them to negotiate a distance with the institution.

Analysis of these three categories of relationship with the institution – cared of, left out, agreement on distance - highlights a material dimension (frequency of contact, technical assistance), a relational dimension (responsiveness, adaptation to needs and constraints), and a symbolic dimension (perception of the institution as a resource or as a waste of time) of distance from the institution.

While these three types of relationship with the institution seem to echo the institutional categories that distinguish the unemployed according to their distance from employment, it should be emphasised that distance from employment and distance from the institution only overlap to a very limited extent. For example, although those who are kept at a distance could be likened to the long-term unemployed, many of them have a history of employment and are particularly active in their job search. By contrast, those who feel they have been cared for have a level of qualifications, scheduling constraints, and a level of mobility or language skills that are commonly perceived as indicators of low employability that is difficult to support (Pillon, 2018). Finally, among the jobseekers who express an agreement on distance, some show clear autonomy in their job search while others seem more fragile, opting for a form of distancing from an institution that is at pains to help them.

2 The dynamics of expectations

While it sheds light on relationships with the institution, categorisation in terms of distance cannot be considered as strictly determined and deserves to be analysed from a dynamic point of view. Indeed, in the course of the biographical interviews, the respondents recount different periods of unemployment and changes in their relationship with the institution. We therefore need to explore the way in which these expectations are constructed and evolve over time, as a result of contacts with the institution. We therefore propose to carry out a cross-analysis of biographical trajectories (Passeron, 1990) and institutional trajectories (Lima, 2017; Couronné & Sarfati, 2022) in order to understand the way in which expectations of the institution are shaped by encounters with its agents and by the categories of institutional understanding. In addition to the pathways, political discourse on unemployment and the unemployed also contributes to the construction of the latter's expectations. It is therefore necessary to examine the way in which these discourses update and influence the expectations formulated by the unemployed with regard to the institution to which they make demands by the very fact of registering with it.

2.1 Expectations shaped by institutional pathways

Far from being set in stone, the relationship with the institution is likely to evolve as the distance between the unemployed and the institution increases or decreases, depending on the case, and the expectations of the unemployed change as a result.

Although a minority, a first type of pathway appears: that of the emergence of a feeling of institutional support, in contrast to a period when the respondents felt alone or sidelined. This is the case for people with a migratory experience and whose country of origin offered a less dense institutional structure in terms of public policies. So, expectations of the

institution are initially very low, which contributes to a feeling of being taken care of. This is the case for Tatiana, who moved to France from Romania:

"Back home, it's not as helpful as it is here. Where I come from, you're on your own, but here, in France, there's a lot of help... You stay at home, they give you... something, and you have the caseworker... No no, where I come from, I don't have that. No. You work, you eat. You don't work, you don't eat. That's all. (Tatiana, aged 35, 24 months registered)

This extract goes beyond the framework of support by PES, and shows that the feeling of being cared of can arise when expectations of the institution are very low.

In other cases, it was the change of advisor that helped to reduce the distance. This was the case for Amina, who described her new advisor as "perfect", compare to the last one:

"So honestly, I'm not going to lie to you, but at the beginning, support was... empty, it was just a wind. There really wasn't much support... Honestly, I wasn't banking on Pôle Emploi at all. I relied on Pôle Emploi for my job search, that's where I went to look for ads, and where I made... well, my applications. But otherwise, no, the support... it was empty. Because... I had to see my advisor once or twice, and the second time was a disaster... I'd explained my situation, that I had a child at the time, that... I needed a job with daytime hours, that I wasn't qualified, that I didn't have any experience, that I had nothing. Well, I'm sorry, but he practically kicked me out. (Amina, aged 39, 10 months registered)

Amina's case shows how her distance from and expectations of the institution fluctuate according to her experiences both inside and outside the institution. Indeed, she says that she had no expectations at the outset, prior to her enrolment, apart from access to job offers⁵. This lack of initial expectations was reinforced by her first contacts with the institution. But when she signed up again several years later, the experience was quite different: Amina felt cared of.

⁵ Anne Fretel (2012) has shown that beyond the idea of bringing together supply and demand that the term suggests, intermediation covers many other forms and meanings.

It therefore appears that for respondents who experience a sudden reduction in their distance from the institution, the low expectations they originally had are likely to have acted as a satisfaction enhancer, leading them to revise their expectations of the support offered upwards.

Conversely, for some of our respondents, their distance from the institution tended to increase over time, again when their advisor changed.

"So my counsellor, I've got a new one, I've never even seen her, so... I had Sabrina Torres with whom things went really well. When I had an interview, for example, I'd tell her, so she'd say: 'Good luck', well, there was a little note, anyway, which was encouraging. Because the new girl, I don't even know her name. [...] After that, it's not her I'm after. But it's the fact that we're changing. You've got a counsellor you know, who... who I've seen several times, and then that's it, you've got someone else, well... For me, it's... It's a shame, a bit, anyway". (Régine, aged 57, 10 months registered)

As well as the fact that she now had a less attentive adviser, Régine also complained that the change was incomprehensible. This compounded her feelings of being distanced from an institution whose inner workings she knew nothing about. In the absence of any explanation, Régine assumed that her first advisor had left the agency. However, the survey revealed that the advisor was still working in the same agency, but had simply changed the way she provided support.

This last case highlights the fact that the transformation of expectations of the institution, as distance from it increases or decreases, depends not only on inter-individual variations in support, but may also be due to a confrontation with the normal functioning of the institution.

On the one hand, institutional support is more sustained at the time of registration and tends to decrease in intensity as the duration of unemployment increases, which is equated with a deterioration in employability or even motivation to look for work, according to the

categories of institutional understanding. On the other hand, expectations of the institution tend to move in the opposite direction, as the need for support increases as job-seeking efforts fail and the feeling of disqualification that follows increases (Paugam, 2007), potentially reinforced by the very fact that the institution turns away from these long-term jobseekers.

Faced with these observations, the majority of the jobseekers we met seemed powerless. They did express their disappointment with the interviewer, but very rarely confronted the institution with its contradictions. Only Régine recounts how she went to "bang her fist on the desk" and asked them to "find her a job". Although she seems to have won her case, it turns out that it was through an agent she knew personally who was able to pass on two as yet unpublished offers.

Émilie (aged 35) is one of the few jobseekers with the resources to find acceptable ways out, even if she regrets the distance from the institution. Having experienced other periods of job-seeking in the course of her career, she has now been registered for 15 months. In fact, she has built up her own expertise in this area and is involved with two associations in helping jobseekers, even though she is still looking for work:

"I have nothing against Pôle Emploi, but it's a bit hypocritical to say that it's the number one employment organisation; for me, it's not an employment organisation, it's an unemployment benefit organisation. They certainly have tools, and people who are... who can provide support, etc., but they absolutely don't have the time. When I found out that my advisor was responsible for 600 people, well, I said to myself: 'well... I think I'll manage on my own.'"

This case illustrates the tensions between institutional categories and individual expectations. This last situation suggests that, over and above the way in which expectations of the institution are shaped by experience and pathways, it is also the representations that respondents have of what the institution can and should do that are affected and transformed

over time, including when this results in a reduction in distance. These representations are not forged solely through experience. They are also shaped by public discourse, which is more or less appropriated and passed on by the councillors themselves.

2.2 Expectations shaped by discourse

The public employment service has undergone major transformations since its creation (Balzani and al. 2008), contributing in particular to the diversification of its missions while, in certain respects, reducing its scope of intervention (Cohen, 2004). For example, the introduction of the *Plan d'Aide au Retour à l'Emploi (PARE)* in 2000 introduced the idea that, in order to receive benefit, unemployed people no longer only had to have paid contributions but also had to *actually look for work*. They thus become job seekers (Boland, 2016; Demazière, 2020). As a result, in addition to the tasks of compensation and intermediation, there is also the task of support (Lavabre, 2022) The definition of this role remains unclear: is it to support people into employment, in employment or in their search for work (Divay, 2012)? These developments are also linked to the spread of project terminology (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) rights and duties (Paulsen Hansen, 2019; Vives and al., 2023) and employability (Tiffon et al., 2017) supporting the deployment of a range of services in the areas of training (Garraud, 1995) and job placement (Vivès, 2013), which are now largely outsourced. This diversification of the institution's roles and missions is likely to fuel beliefs and representations of how the labour market works (Duclos et al., 2018) and of what PES can and should do. A discrepancy then emerges between what the respondents expect from the institution and what they get from it, a discrepancy that can play both a negative and a positive role. In addition to the interplay of career paths, it is also the interplay of public discourse that shapes representations of the institution and therefore expectations of it.

In fact, the feeling of being cared of is particularly expressed by people who receive help or resources they did not expect, particularly in terms of training. While the respondents' lack of qualifications undoubtedly favours a positive reception of the access to training made possible by PES, it is also because they had few expectations in this area, not knowing that it was possible.

Conversely, the feeling of being left out arises from disappointing experiences in which the respondents' expectations seem to be ignored, disregarded or even explicitly challenged. In fact, while the use of training and other services is generally appreciated, the situation is very different when it comes to placement and intermediation, which, for almost all the respondents, is the institution's core mission.

"I got on the phone to her and got a bit annoyed, saying: 'Anyway, since 2012, Pôle Emploi has never offered me a job'. She said: 'We're not here to find you a job!' "I said, "Are you here to give us a boost or what? And that was it.

So what did she say?

Well, she told me: "We're not here to find you a job! It's up to you to find your own way, and...". I said, "Well, I can understand that! Ever since I lost my husband, I've been the one finding work. I swear, it's always me who's found a job" (Samira, aged 54, registered for 9 years).

Many of the respondents said that they had low expectations but were still disappointed. In fact, for the respondents, public discourse maintains the idea of an equivalence between looking for a job and registering with PES. While the labour "market" metaphor has been regularly criticised (Duclos *et al.*, 2018), PES is seen as a marketplace for many of the respondents. One of them, for example, refers to his job search as "Pôle emploi research". Others denounced the fact that they had been asked to stop updating their registration after returning to work, even though they still considered themselves to be looking for work:

"I'm sorry, they tell you you're not entitled... When you're part-time and you're looking for full-time work, I'm sorry, you have the right. That's a load of rubbish, you've got the right, in the

end... It's all nonsense, you shouldn't listen to what they tell you. [...] I had problems with this jobcentre, because they were determined to get me off the lists. And, well, I didn't give in and I won, so there you go. [...] It's not to make trouble, I mean, there's no need to take me off the lists, if I want to stay registered, you know... I want to stay registered until I have a stable, secure situation above all. Because I've lost confidence, you know, with the reforms and everything, you've lost confidence. (Christine, aged 52, 20 years registered)

It is the very idea of public service that appears to be undermined in situations where reducing unemployment figures is seen as a priority over the safety net and sense of inclusion that being registered provides for some people. In this respect, several respondents were disappointed to note that support towards employment is often reduced to the payment of benefits. These factors attest both to a misunderstanding of what the institution can do and to the dissemination of expectations that are largely shaped by the discourses that contribute to making registration with PES a material and symbolic marker of one's situation as a jobseeker and of the active nature of one's behaviour, following the injunctions produced by public discourse.

In fact, another discourse is being widely disseminated from political arenas and public institutions to jobseekers, that of the standards of conduct to be adopted in the job search. These are now subsumed under the broader term of activation (of policies, spending, the public), which in turn refers to the concept of an active welfare state (Matagne, 2001) supposed to reform the ageing 'welfare state'. Translated into the institutional terms of PES, job-seeking must not only be "active, concrete and justifiable by means of evidence" but also implies "a systematic response to any summons from Pôle emploi or, where appropriate, justification for absences"⁶. In short, jobseekers must fulfil *duties* in order to claim their *rights*. While critical analyses are commonplace, only a handful of studies have taken a

⁶ www.pole-emploi.fr

comprehensive approach to job-seeking (Boland, 2021; Demazière, 2017; 2018). Likewise, our survey shows that the unemployed are not simply compliant with the rules of the game imposed by the institution, but actually adhere to these discourses and representations of the social world. While a minority feel that they are "good sheep", like Amina, or "good little soldiers" like Didier, i.e. those who respond to the demands of the institution out of docility and/or fear of control, another proportion of our respondents (sometimes the same ones) take on board the common sense of "the entitled" (*les assistés*). It is presented as the counterpart to the benefit system and as a form of justice:

"It's only fair that we justify something. I agree with that. On that, I agree. [...] Making a difference between people who are looking and those who aren't, because there are some who aren't, and that's not normal. For those who aren't working and aren't looking, something needs to be done. It's not normal." (Christine, aged 52, 20 years registered)

In this way, "the entitled" are mobilised as a repulsive figure in relation to whom it is necessary to distinguish oneself by systematically justifying good behaviour in terms of job-seeking (Dubois, 2015). Many justify the "active" aspect of their job search by the need to prove to PES - and to themselves - that they are not only obedient but also among the "good" unemployed:

"I do it to... to have... a justification, and somewhere, to show that I don't do nothing with my days [...] But I confess, I'm not aiming to wait until the end of my rights, to... See, I'm not a... I'm not a profiteer... I'm not at all in that frame of mind of... there you go, of taking full advantage of everything I've got in the way of rights... there you go". (Émilie, aged 35, 15 months registered)

"At least they understand that I'm not at home watching Netflix all day" (Bruno, aged 52, 12 months registered)

"I didn't want to be the unemployed guy who didn't move from home to do anything" (Pierre, aged 23, 28 months registered)

"But I wanted to show that... no, I... I wasn't a wanker" (Martin, aged 37, 9 months registered)

So, it's not about questioning the validity of the image of the unemployed as bad people. On the contrary, they subscribe to this stigmatising discourse in order to distance themselves from it. They insist on the trying "work of unemployment" (Demazière, 2017) and criticise the institution for not honouring its commitments, even though they do so on a daily basis, taking on board the logic of rights and duties. Javier, for example, as well as checking job ads every morning on the various institutional websites, fills in his own job-search tracking tool; for Mohammed, "the Pôle emploi [...] is like going to work". As such, he accepts "all the workshops" offered by his advisor and does not question her recommendations. In addition to this job-seeking attitude, several of them, such as Pierre and Sofiane, emphasised their attachment to work and their rejection of idleness:

"I wanted to find work, I'm a young person... Yeah, I want to work, I don't want to do nothing all day, that's all. But no matter how much we say it, the people in front of us, 'well, as long as they don't see us doing it, they can't... No matter how much we say it, it comes out one way, it comes in the other...". (Pierre, 23 years, 28 months registered)

"At that point, it's true, to be able to work, I said to myself: well, you almost have to... I'd almost have to go to the ends of the earth to find a job, so... So I contacted companies all over France, which meant that, well, I got this opportunity in the Paris region, which is more than 250 km from where Sofiane (aged 66, 12 months registered) lives and after having accumulated "almost 7,000 applications" over six years of job search.

These respondents therefore do not fit the image of the unemployed profiteer, of the welfare recipient who does not really look for work, who does not fulfil his or her obligations to the institution that pays them. Yet they do not find a job, nor are they offered one by the PES. In the final analysis, our respondents' adherence to the discourse on the labour market attests to a second misunderstanding: to the discourse of the institution, which refers jobseekers to their own responsibilities, they react, by mirror effect, and in turn refer the PES to its own

responsibilities. But in doing so, they are not seeking to challenge the discursive rhetoric of self-discipline. On the contrary, they take it seriously and point out its flaws. In other words, if the main explanation for the persistence of unemployment is that it is a problem of adaptation, and that this is not the responsibility of jobseekers because they are self-disciplined, then the solution must lie with the institution. The credence given by jobseekers to institutional discourse then contributes to the construction of expectations that are all the more likely to be disappointed.

What's more, while employment support provided by volunteers can result in an *exit* route for dissatisfied jobseekers (Clouet & Lavabre, 2018), the men and women supervised by PES rarely have the resources to do without the "benefits" associated with their registration. They therefore remain registered, sometimes for a long time, and join the ranks of abandoned jobseekers.

Conclusion: the activation paradox

Public denunciations of unemployed people who, despite receiving benefit, are not looking for work are legion. Apart from their moral nature, these statements encourage Pôle emploi to monitor more closely those who are not active enough in their job search and, where necessary, to penalise those who are. They also have the effect of encouraging jobseekers to adopt standards of conduct in terms of job search. The empirical evidence gathered in this survey shows that the focus on supposed deviations obscures a significant phenomenon: a significant proportion of jobseekers giving up. The focus on what the institution expects of jobseekers casts a veil over what jobseekers expect of the institution.

As they "actively" seek employment and take the institution's official missions seriously, they have expectations that go far beyond mere compensation. Being listened to, being advised, obtaining job offers, in a word being accompanied towards employment, are the different

facets of what the unemployed expect from the institution. While the title of a scheme such as the "reasonable job offer" does indeed say that jobseekers are supposed to accept, under certain conditions, the proposals made by the institution at the risk of losing their rights, it implies above all that the institution could, or even should, offer them a job. Symptomatically, only a small proportion of our respondents were offered a job. The experience of looking for work is most often at a distance from the institution, whether or not this is the product of an agreement with their advisor. We have also shown that this distance is not established in the same way depending on gender and the resources available to each person. That said, it tends to increase over time, whatever the situation of the respondents. While the variations analysed in relation to this (lack of) support partly relate to categorisation and the normal operation of Pôle emploi, which selects and prioritises unemployed people according to their profile, the trajectories reported largely highlight a form of renunciation, or impossibility, on the part of the institution to help them, most often due to a lack of human resources.

While interactionist studies most often focus on the norms and expectations of institutions on the one hand, and on the social distance between users and the institution on the other (Dubois, 2003), we mobilise distance in its relational, material and symbolic dimensions, proposing a contribution to the sociological analysis of public action from the point of view of those who use it (Revillard, 2018). Ultimately, we defend the following idea: to think about the social state is to think about its institutions as much as the relationships to them in a system of governmentality.

In this way, we demonstrate the value of analysing the expectations of those to whom we are addressing our relationships with institutions. As a product of public discourse, their social characteristics and their background, these expectations are made up of tensions between the injunctions issued by society and mediated by the decision-makers in public action and the constraints encountered by employment advisers in carrying out their work. In a way, the

more public discourse focuses on the need to activate jobseekers, the more expectations it creates... which it ends up disappointing; what we propose to call the *paradox of activation*.

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