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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The perceived fair duration of unemployment benefits for older workers. The role of lifetime achievements in the labour market

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## Abstract

The welfare state regulates social policies and reallocates scarce resources. For the social legitimacy of the welfare state, it is important that the public supports the principles underlying this reallocation. This article examines the impact of different activities during the life course on public deservingness perceptions of older unemployed people. In a factorial survey experiment conducted among a random sample of individuals drawn from German administrative employment records, we examine the maximum duration of benefit receipt which is perceived as fair for older unemployed persons with different biographies. The results indicate strong public support for a nexus between previous contributions and benefit entitlements. Besides financial contributions to unemployment insurance, parenting and further training are considered to be ‘lifetime achievements’ which justify longer unemployment benefit receipt. We interpret these findings as an expression of a generalised form of reciprocity which guides perceptions of deservingness regarding older unemployed persons.

## KEYWORDS

deservingness, factorial survey, Germany, maximum benefit duration, unemployment insurance

## INTRODUCTION

In light of the ongoing transformation of the welfare state, the social legitimacy of welfare arrangements has recently received increased attention in social policy research (e.g., Buss, 2019; van Oorschot et al., 2017). Welfare programmes and institutions are based on certain notions of a just relation between effort and reward and a certain standard of living that society owes people in

return for their contribution to society (Bowles & Gintis, 2000; Mau, 2004). As Roosma, Gelissen and van Oorschot note: ‘The welfare state’s redistribution process must be embedded in a shared idea of social justice and fairness to be legitimate’ (Roosma et al., 2013: p. 237).

It has been shown that across countries and social categories, the elderly are regarded as a particularly deserving group (van Oorschot, 2006). Moreover, within the group of unemployed—who are generally considered

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less deserving than the elderly—the perceived deservingness seems to increase with age. Several studies showed that the public would grant higher benefit levels or longer maximum benefit durations to older unemployed people than to younger ones and would link benefit receipt to fewer obligations than for the younger unemployed (Buss, 2019; Osiander et al., 2022; Osiander & Senghaas, 2020; Saunders, 2002). However, little is known so far about differentiations within the group of older unemployed persons.

Taking the maximum duration of unemployment benefit receipt in Germany as an example, this article examines which principles guide judgements regarding fair benefit entitlements of older unemployed people and investigates the impact of different activities during an individual's life course on these judgements. We are particularly interested in exploring whether activities other than paid work are considered to be 'lifetime achievements' and justify longer maximum benefit durations in the eyes of the public, and if so, which ones. This issue connects with the criticism that social insurance, and particularly unemployment and pension insurance, are targeted at the 'standard' career of continuous full-time employment, while people with discontinuous employment histories, in marginal part-time employment and doing temporary or freelance work are not protected to the same extent (Eichhorst & Marx, 2010; Schulze Buschoff & Schmidt, 2009). Another related point of criticism is that unemployment insurance does not adequately address the challenges arising from the reconciliation of employment, family life and lifelong learning from a longitudinal perspective (Klammer, 2004).

In the following sections, we outline the institutional framework of the German unemployment insurance system, conceptualise perceptions of the fairness of benefit entitlements and formulate hypotheses within the framework of deservingness theory. We subsequently give a brief overview of data and methods. The results of our research show strong public support for a nexus between previous contributions and entitlement to longer maximum benefit durations. Besides financial contributions to the unemployment scheme, we found parenting and periods of education to be considered activities that justified longer periods of unemployment benefit receipt. Finally, our key findings are summarised and discussed.

## INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IN GERMAN UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The unemployment insurance system is one of the main pillars of the German social security system. It was

introduced in 1927 and at that time complemented the social insurance legislation of the late 19th century (Münnich, 2010). As is typical of social insurance systems, redistribution mechanisms in the unemployment insurance system are horizontal rather than vertical. Redistribution takes place between employees who run a high or low risk of becoming unemployed, between regions with high or low rates of unemployment (Bruckmeier & Schwengler, 2010), and between jobs in domains exposed to cyclical upturns and downturns and jobs in other branches of the economy (Stephan, 2016).

It is obligatory for all full-time and part-time employees to be part of the unemployment insurance system, with the exception of marginal part-time workers<sup>1</sup> and public servants. Self-employed workers can contribute to the unemployment insurance system voluntarily under certain conditions, but few make use of this option (Jahn & Oberfichtner, 2020). Employees who have paid unemployment insurance contributions via their social security contributions for a qualifying period of 12 months during a base period of 30 months preceding their claim (24 months during the time of our survey) are entitled to receive unemployment benefits, regardless of their actual need. Individuals who are not entitled to unemployment insurance benefits, whose unemployment benefits are not sufficient to cover their basic needs, or whose entitlements have expired can claim benefits from Germany's basic income system. The basic income programme—which is commonly referred to as 'Hartz IV'—is means-tested at the household level and provides fixed-rate benefits ('unemployment benefit II') intended to meet the sociocultural subsistence level.

The replacement rate of unemployment insurance, which is the focus of this article, is 60% of the previous net income up to a pre-determined maximum amount. Claimants with dependent children are granted 67% of their previous net income. While the replacement rate has remained relatively stable over the past decades of welfare state transformation,<sup>2</sup> there has been repeated controversy regarding the maximum duration of benefit receipt. Since the mid-1980s, entitlement rights for older claimants have been gradually extended. From the mid-1980s onwards, older claimants with an adequate contribution record were entitled to receive benefits for 18–32 months at most, with the maximum period of 32 months applying to those aged 54 or older (since 1997: 57 or older) (Bothfeld & Rosenthal, 2018: p. 282). In 2006, the maximum duration of benefit entitlement was reduced to 18 months (Dlugosz et al., 2014; Blank, 2020: p. 514), only to be raised again in

<sup>1</sup>Marginal employment means employment with an income of less than EUR 450 per month.

<sup>2</sup>In 1994, the replacement rate was reduced from 63% to 60% (from 68% to 67% for claimants with children).

2008 after intense debate. Since then, unemployed persons aged 50–54 have been entitled to receive unemployment benefits for up to 15 months, those aged 55–57 for up to 18 months, and claimants aged 58 and above can receive benefits for up to 24 months. Entitlement to the maximum length of benefit receipt requires previous employment for at least 30 (for ages 50–54), 36 (for ages 55–57) or 48 (those aged 58 and above) months during the 5 years preceding the benefit claim.

Economic research based on German data provides evidence that the duration of unemployment increases with the potential increase in maximum benefit durations (e.g., Schmieder et al., 2012) and that re-entry wages decrease due to longer periods of unemployment (e.g., Schmieder et al., 2016). Reducing the potential duration of benefit entitlement also reduces rates of entry into unemployment (Dlugosz et al., 2014; Riphahn & Schrader, 2020).

At the same time, however, generous unemployment insurance regulations may prevent negative effects of unemployment on workers' subsequent careers, such as downward occupational and industrial mobility. In a cross-country comparison, Gangl (2006) finds negative effects of unemployment duration on wages, but his results also suggest lower unemployment durations in countries with more generous unemployment insurance systems.

In recent years, political debate about prolonging maximum entitlement has become more intense in Germany. Left-wing political parties and labour unions in particular argue for an extension of the maximum benefit duration for claimants with long contribution records in order to respect their 'lifetime achievements' (DGB, 2019; DIE LINKE, 2019; SPD, 2019).

## CONCEPTUALISING PERCEPTIONS OF THE FAIRNESS OF BENEFIT ENTITLEMENTS

The institutional design of welfare states and welfare programmes is based on certain ideas about how resources should be distributed, thereby accentuating different normative principles of distributive justice. To a greater extent than social programmes that are characterised by universal provision or social assistance where entitlement is based on need, social insurance programmes stress *equity* as an organising principle (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). Funding through contributions, entitlement based on contribution records and a proportional relationship between earnings, contributions and payments are typical manifestations of the principle of equity. Alternative terms used in the literature on principles in social policy are *equivalence* or *reciprocity* (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002, p. 94; Leitner & Lessenich, 2003).

Research on popular deservingness perceptions provides insights to understand whether the public supports different logics when it comes to allocating benefits and services through social policy programmes. This literature examines public judgements about whether particular social groups are considered to be deserving of public support and if so, to what extent. Deservingness theory has identified several criteria that serve as heuristics in judgements regarding deservingness (van Oorschot, 2000; van Oorschot et al., 2017): the less *control* welfare claimants have over their situation, the more compliant and grateful they are (*attitude*), and the more they signal that they are giving or doing something in return for public support (*reciprocity*), the more deserving they are in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, judgements are influenced by the perceived proximity of the welfare claimant to the person assessing their deservingness (*identity*) and by the level of actual or perceived *need* of the potential welfare claimant. Recently, Heuer and Zimmermann (2020) additionally identified the criterion of *social investment*, which refers to (potential) future returns on current investment. Furthermore, Knotz, Gandenberger, Fossati and Bonoli (2022, p. 931) proposed a distinction between 'past reciprocal acts' (such as previous employment) and currently performed efforts to overcome or prevent needing public support (such as active job search when being unemployed or compliance with a suggested treatment when being sick).

A first assumption derived from deservingness theory is that older unemployed people who have contributed to the system for longer periods of time in the past should consequently receive payments for longer in the future. Financial contributions signal reciprocity and should therefore increase deservingness. Linking the maximum benefit duration to the lengths of previous contributions would also stress *equity* as an organising principle of the unemployment insurance system. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** (H1): *Longer contribution records justify longer maximum unemployment benefit durations.*

Previous contributions to social security insurances are commonly used in deservingness research to operationalise the criterion of *reciprocity* (e.g., Knotz et al., 2022; Koostra, 2016). There are, however, other activities which may be considered as reciprocal behaviour in a broader sense. Parenting is a prime example of an activity signalling a contribution to society as a whole. While parenting involves mothers and fathers, long child-related employment interruptions are predominantly a female issue in Germany from an empirical point of view. Thus, parenting might be perceived as even more important when judging the benefit duration for a mother than for a father.

**Hypothesis 2a.** (H2a): *Parenting justifies longer maximum unemployment benefit durations.*

Deservingness theory suggests that the perceived deservingness also varies with the attitude of potential welfare claimants. In light of this, activities indicating a work ethos and diligence in a professional context should increase the perceived deservingness even if they are not linked to financial contributions to the unemployment insurance system. Self-employment and further training are examples of such activities. We therefore formulate the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2b.** (H2b): *Self-employment justifies longer maximum unemployment benefit durations.*

**Hypothesis 2c.** (H2c): *Participation in further training justifies longer maximum unemployment benefit durations.*

We assume that previous unemployment, in contrast, does not increase the perceived deservingness of older unemployed people. Unemployment does not necessarily correspond to unemployment benefit receipt, but individuals do not pay contributions to the unemployment insurance system during periods of unemployment and neither is unemployment considered socially useful. Furthermore, unemployed people are more likely to be held responsible for their situation, in particular if compared to the elderly or to disabled people (van Oorschot, 2006). Up to a certain degree, unemployed people are thus regarded to be in control of their situation. In light of these findings, our last hypothesis is:

**Hypothesis 3.** (H3): *Previous periods of unemployment do not justify longer maximum unemployment benefit duration.*

Besides financial contributions to the unemployment insurance system and professional activities signalling a work ethos, financial savings are a further dimension of interest. Savings become relevant when unemployment benefit entitlements expire. As described above, individuals without entitlements to unemployment benefits may claim means-tested basic income. From an institutional perspective, means-tested benefits accentuate the principle of need. Against this background, individual savings may be interpreted as indicating a low level of need and thus a low level of deservingness. However, savings may also be interpreted as signalling a positive attitude towards work or towards making provisions for the future: either individuals have worked so diligently in the

past that they were able to put something by, or they have been forward-thinking and responsible enough to save up for a rainy day. Following this line of reasoning, the perceived deservingness should increase if individuals have savings. Since these assumptions point in different directions, we do not formulate a specific hypothesis on the influence of savings.

## DATA AND METHODS

We analyse perceptions of fairness of benefit entitlements using a factorial survey experiment. Factorial survey experiments—also called vignette studies—are a well-established instrument in empirical justice research (Jasso, 2006; Liebig et al., 2015). In the social policy field, they have been applied to different research fields, such as just pensions (Castillo et al., 2019), perceptions of fairness regarding wage settlements (Pfeifer et al., 2017) or the perceived deservingness of welfare claimants (Buss, 2019; Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019).

### Sample

The sample for our online survey was drawn from a 2% sample of the Institute of Employment Research Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB V13.01.00–181,010, Nuremberg 2018). The Integrated Employment Biographies cover all registered spells of employment subject to social security contributions, unemployment benefit receipt, job search and participation in labour market programmes. Two random samples were drawn for different contact modes. The first sample consisted of individuals who were at least temporarily registered as jobseekers, benefit recipients or participants in labour market programmes during the 2013–2017 period. This group was contacted by email, provided that an email address was available in the Federal Employment Agency's operational system. The second sample included individuals who were registered as employed during the respective period and had no episodes of job search or unemployment benefit receipt stored in the administrative data for this period. This group was invited by post to participate in the online survey. Our sample was restricted to German citizens and to individuals who were at least 18 years old at the time of data collection, as we wanted to focus on persons eligible to vote in German federal elections.

The data were collected in the framework of a larger study between 4 November 2019 and 7 January 2020 (see Osiander et al., 2020). Based on a gross sample of about 35,000 persons, 25,000 of whom were contacted by email



TABLE 1 Sample means

Variable	Measurement	Mean
Male (ref: female)	0/1 = no/yes	0.56
Age	Years	45.47
Children (ref: none)	0/1 = no/yes	0.61
Eastern Germany (ref: Western Germany)	0/1 = no/yes	0.16
Education		
No vocational training	0/1 = no/yes	0.03
Vocational training or upper secondary school-leaving qualification	0/1 = no/yes	0.57
University degree	0/1 = no/yes	0.40
Monthly household net income		
Less than €1500	0/1 = no/yes	0.12
€1500 to less than €2000	0/1 = no/yes	0.11
€2000 to less than €3000	0/1 = no/yes	0.20
€3000 to less than €4000	0/1 = no/yes	0.22
€4000 to less than €5000	0/1 = no/yes	0.13
€5000 or more	0/1 = no/yes	0.16
No information on net income	0/1 = no/yes	0.07
Employment status at the time of the survey		
Regular employment	0/1 = no/yes	0.74
Public servant	0/1 = no/yes	0.01
Self-employed	0/1 = no/yes	0.02
Marginally employed	0/1 = no/yes	0.01
School/vocational training/student	0/1 = no/yes	0.06
Pensioner	0/1 = no/yes	0.09
Unemployed	0/1 = no/yes	0.06
Other	0/1 = no/yes	0.03
Party preference		
Christian conservative party	0/1 = no/yes	0.17
Social democratic party	0/1 = no/yes	0.11
Right-wing populist party (AfD)	0/1 = no/yes	0.04
Liberal democratic party	0/1 = no/yes	0.04
Left-wing party (DIE LINKE)	0/1 = no/yes	0.08
Green party	0/1 = no/yes	0.25
Other party	0/1 = no/yes	0.04
No party preference	0/1 = no/yes	0.10
Apolitical	0/1 = no/yes	0.04
No information on party preference	0/1 = no/yes	0.13
Perceived risk of becoming unemployed within 12 months		
High	0/1 = no/yes	0.78
Low	0/1 = no/yes	0.13

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variable	Measurement	Mean
No information	0/1 = low/high	0.09
'The individual is not to blame for unemployment'	0/1 = agree + neutral/disagree	0.15
'Every unemployed person has the power to change their own professional situation'	0/1 = disagree + neutral/agree	0.57
Labour market history 2013–2018		
Years in employment	Years	4.51
Years receiving unemployment benefits	Years	0.27
Years receiving means-tested basic income	Years	0.27
Years seeking a job	Years	0.76
Last position part-time	0/1 = no/yes	0.29
Daily wage rate in last position	Euros	108.64
Benefit receipt during life (until the end of 2018)		
Unemployment benefits	0/1 = no/yes	0.62
Means-tested basic income support	0/1 = no/yes	0.20

Note:  $N = 998$ .

Source: Authors' own calculations.

and 10,000 by post, a final sample size of 1319 completed questionnaires was achieved. Provided that the respondents gave their consent to do so, survey data were merged with the Integrated Employment Biographies in order to obtain objective information about respondents' education and labour market history. A total of 1023 respondents (78%) gave their consent to record linkage.

The analysis presented in the following is based on the data of those respondents with no item nonresponse who agreed to record linkage and evaluated at least one of the four vignettes presented to them.<sup>3</sup> This results in a sample of  $n = 998$  respondents. Respondents are between 18 and 77 years old (mean age: 45). Some further basic features of our sample are that 61% of the respondents have a least one child, 57% have completed vocational training or upper secondary school-leaving qualification (but no university degree), while 40% have a university degree as their highest completed level of education and training. Table 1 presents respondents' characteristics in more detail. At the time of the survey, 74% were employed, 9% were retired and 6% were unemployed.

<sup>3</sup>We used a newer version of the Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB) (V14.00.00–190927) for the analysis than we used to draw the sample. A small number of observations had to be excluded because person identifiers were corrected across IEB versions.

Roughly, 2% were self-employed and 1% were public servants, which reflects the fact that these groups are not regularly covered by the Integrated Employment Biographies. However, our sampling strategy ensured that we captured the perspective of the contributors to the unemployment insurance system. Moreover, we addressed those who had, at least temporarily, received unemployment benefits during previous years. According to the administrative data, 62% had received unemployment benefits from the unemployment insurance system at least once since 1975.

## The vignette design

In our factorial survey, we presented several short scenarios (vignettes) describing a fictitious 50-year-old unemployed person and asked respondents to state the maximum period for which this person should receive unemployment benefits. Crucial aspects of the biography of the fictitious benefit recipient were varied in their levels to display different periods of previous contributions to the unemployment insurance scheme, different activities signalling contributions to society as a whole, work ethos or diligence in a professional context. Moreover, the level of necessity for the fictitious individual to rely on savings or to claim basic income after the expiry of unemployment benefits was varied, as was the gender of the benefit recipient. The combination of the four different dimensions and levels (Table 2) resulted in a universe with 84 possible vignette variations.

One example of a vignette reads as follows:

*A 50-year-old **woman** has recently become unemployed and is receiving unemployment benefits. She was employed by her last employer for four years. After her unemployment benefits expire, the woman will have to **apply for means-tested basic income from the state ('Hartz IV')**. The woman started working when she was 22 years old. In the 28 years since then **she has been employed for 17 years** and has paid unemployment insurance contributions. For the remaining time she **looked after her two children and took part in further training**.*

The parts printed in bold show the dimensions that were varied. They were also highlighted visually for the respondents. In an introductory note, all respondents were presented some of the core features of the German unemployment insurance system, such as the fact that employees pay contributions to the unemployment

TABLE 2 Vignette dimensions and levels

Dimension	Levels
Gender	Female
	Male
Contributions to unemployment insurance	17 years
	22 years
	27 years
Need	Has to use savings to cover living costs after unemployment benefits expire
	Has to apply for means-tested basic income support after unemployment benefits expire
Activities other than employment	No information
	Parenting
	Parenting and participation in further training
	Self-employment
	Self-employment and participation in further training
	Unemployment
	Unemployment and participation in further training

insurance system and that unemployed individuals applying for benefits need to register with their local employment agency. Moreover, the respondents were informed that according to the current legislation unemployed individuals who are 50 years old are entitled to receive unemployment benefits for up to 15 months. We thereby ensured that all respondents were aware of the current legal situation when making their judgement. We additionally wanted to test whether providing respondents with more detailed information on the maximum duration of benefit receipt led to anchoring effects, that is, that respondents would adjust their judgements according to the values presented to them (Kahneman, 2012, Chapter 11). Prior to seeing the vignettes about the role of lifetime achievements described here, the respondents evaluated four vignettes with regard to other aspects of the unemployment insurance system. In this first part of the survey, we randomly provided detailed information on the maximum duration of benefit receipt as a function of the recipient's age (12 months up to the age of 49, gradual increase to up to 24 months for people aged 58 and above) to about half of the respondents. The other half of the respondents did not receive any additional information.

We chose the example of a 50-year-old person who started working at the age of 22 in order to assess which

activities are considered to be part of the lifetime achievement of older unemployed people. Many labour market policy programmes in Germany are targeted at individuals aged 50 or older. As mentioned above, such individuals are also granted longer maximum durations of unemployment benefit receipt. To demonstrate eligibility for the maximum benefit duration we added the information that the person had been employed during the previous 4 years.

We used 17, 22 and 27 years as different levels of previous contributions to the unemployment insurance system through social insurance contributions (H1), as some reform options discussed in the political arena are aiming at a staggered prolongation of the entitlement period if the contribution period exceeds 20 years. Related to our hypotheses that activities other than employment also justify longer maximum benefit durations (H2a–H2c) and that periods of unemployment, in contrast, do not justify longer maximum benefit durations (H3), we varied what the recipient did in the time they were not employed—a period of one, 6 or 11 years, depending on the length of time for which contributions were previously made. We included parenting, being self-employed and being unemployed, and we combined all these activities in other levels together with participation in further training. We did not present participation in further training as a separate level because long periods of education (up to 11 years in our scenarios) in the middle of a person's working life might appear rather unusual. Moreover, we added one level where respondents did not receive any information about the 'gap' between years in employment and previous contributions. The recipient either had savings to live on after the unemployment benefits expired or had to rely on means-tested basic income.

## Variables and methods

For each of the four vignettes presented to the participants, respondents indicated how long the maximum period should be for which the fictitious person should receive unemployment benefits. The dependent variable (maximum entitlement period) was collected in a free data field that was marked with the word 'months'. Respondents could enter an integer between 0 and 99.

In addition to the vignettes, we collected basic sociodemographic information from respondents, such as their current employment status, the existence of children and their classified net household income. Given that motives of self-interest have been shown to be an important determinant of welfare attitudes (Baslevent & Kirmanoglu, 2011; Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Jæger, 2006), we additionally

asked respondents who were in employment at the time of data collection how they assessed the probability of their being unemployed at least temporarily over the coming 12 months. Furthermore, we asked about sociopolitical attitudes, namely respondents' preferred political party and their attitude towards the unemployed. With regard to the latter, we collected the extent of their agreement with the statements 'the individual is not to blame for his/her unemployment' and 'it is up to every unemployed person to change their own professional situation'.

Our data consist of up to four vignette ratings per respondent. Observations are therefore nested within respondents. To account for the hierarchical data structure, we estimate fixed and random effects models to analyse the effects of the characteristics of recipients (vignette dimensions) and respondents on the maximum benefit duration perceived as fair.

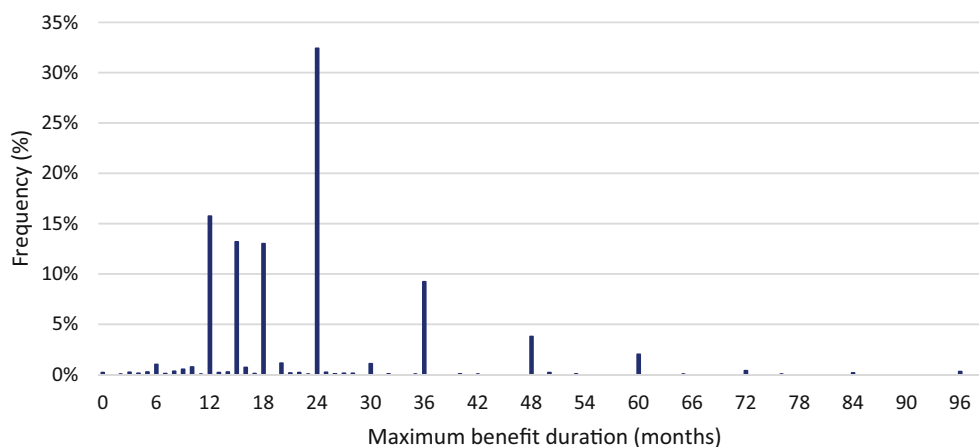
## RESULTS

Across the whole pool of vignettes encompassing fictitious 50-year-old unemployed benefit recipients with different characteristics and biographies (3989 observations), the respondents considered an average maximum benefit duration of 24 months to be fair. Figure 1 displays the distribution of ratings. A maximum benefit duration of 24 months was chosen in 32% of the scenarios. A maximum entitlement period of 15 months—the status quo presented to all respondents in the introductory note—was chosen in 13% of the scenarios. In 16% of the scenarios, respondents chose a duration of 12 months—the maximum benefit duration for unemployed people under 50.

Table 3 presents the findings of the multivariate analyses. The first two specifications include only the vignette features. The reference scenario is a woman who has been employed for 17 years during the last 28 years. No information is given on what she did in the remaining 11 years. The woman has to use her own savings to cover her living expenses after the unemployment benefits expire. The constant for this scenario is a maximum entitlement period of approximately 21 months.

The maximum entitlement period differs significantly according to the individual circumstances of the older unemployed individual and the course of their life. Of all the vignette features, it is the duration of the previous employment which causes the most important difference in the maximum benefit duration perceived as being fair. Compared to a 50-year-old person who spent 17 of the last 28 years in employment, a person of the same age who has worked for 22 years was granted a maximum entitlement period of more than two additional months.





**FIGURE 1** Distribution of maximum unemployment benefit durations perceived as being fair (in months). *Source:* Authors' own illustration.  $N$  (respondents) = 998;  $N$  (responses) = 3989

For a person who has worked for 27 of the last 28 years, the bonus amounted to more than 3 months. Both differences are highly significant. The results support H1: longer contribution records justify longer maximum benefit durations.

In the reference scenario, no information was given about the gap between the years in employment and the years that have passed since entering the labour market. When respondents received the information that the person had been taking care of their two children in the meantime, the maximum entitlement period perceived as fair was more than 2 months longer, confirming H2a. Parenting had the largest effect of all activities other than employment that were presented in the scenarios. In additional estimates (Table A1), however, we find no significant interaction between parenting and the gender of the person described.

Contrary to what we expected (H2b), self-employment did not justify longer benefit receipt in the eyes of our respondents. We found partial support for our hypothesis that participation in further training justifies longer maximum benefit duration (H2c): a fictitious benefit recipient who had raised two children and participated in further training was granted an additional 1.5 months (compared to when no activities during the gap were mentioned). However, participation in further training in combination with parenting had a smaller effect on the maximum benefit duration than parenting alone. Moreover, participation in further training had a small positive effect when combined with self-employment. Compared with the reference scenario where no information was given about the gap, there was a small significant increase of less than 1 month in the fair maximum entitlement period if the benefit recipient had been self-employed and had participated in further training. In line with what we expected, benefit recipients who were

previously unemployed were granted a significantly lower maximum entitlement period (H3). The coefficient becomes positive if the recipient has additionally participated in further training, but the difference from the reference scenario is not statistically significant.

Furthermore, we found small but significant differences for the existence of savings and for the gender of the benefit recipient. Compared to a benefit recipient who had to use their savings to cover living costs after unemployment benefits expired, a slightly shorter maximum entitlement period was considered fair if the benefit recipient had to apply for means-tested benefits afterwards. Moreover, there is a small gender difference in the judgements, with female recipients being granted slightly longer maximum benefit durations on average.

The last specification presented in Table 3 additionally includes respondents' characteristics as explanatory variables. In line with previous findings on the importance of self-interest with regard to welfare attitudes, respondents with a low household income considered a longer maximum benefit period to be fair than did respondents with an average household income (€3000–<4000). In particular, those with a very low household income (<€1500) granted considerably longer maximum benefit durations. However, we did not find consistent evidence regarding the influence of previous periods of unemployment or the respondents' perceived risk of becoming unemployed. Years of receiving unemployment benefits or means-tested basic income support during the 2013–2018 period did not have a significant impact and nor did the question as to whether respondents had ever received unemployment benefits before. However, if respondents had received means-tested basic income before at some point, they granted more than three additional months on average. Other aspects of the

**TABLE 3** Impact of recipients' and respondents' characteristics on the maximum benefit entitlement period (in months) considered fair: Fixed and random effects models

	Fixed effects		Random effects		Random effects	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Recipient in scenario						
Reference: employed for 17 years during previous 28 years						
Employed for 22 years	2.143***	0.174	2.131***	0.173	2.136***	0.173
Employed for 27 years	3.327***	0.169	3.315***	0.169	3.314***	0.169
Reference: using savings to cover living costs after unemployment benefits expire						
Means-tested benefits after expiry	−0.539***	0.142	−0.521***	0.141	−0.521***	0.141
Reference: no information on further activities during previous 28 years						
Raising children	2.318***	0.309	2.294***	0.306	2.284***	0.306
Raising children + further training	1.500***	0.276	1.513***	0.275	1.509***	0.275
Self-employed	0.139	0.284	0.149	0.283	0.149	0.283
Self-employed + further training	0.894***	0.315	0.832***	0.313	0.825***	0.312
Unemployed	−0.590**	0.281	−0.607**	0.279	−0.614**	0.279
Unemployed + further training	0.216	0.280	0.186	0.279	0.178	0.279
Female (ref.: male)	0.516***	0.136	0.511***	0.135	0.512***	0.135
Detailed information on maximum benefit duration (ref. no)					−3.969***	0.883
Respondent's characteristics						
Female					−2.531***	0.982
Reference: Aged 50–59						
<29					−1.834	1.864
30–39					0.403	1.333
40–49					1.196	1.313
≥60					−1.890	1.616
Children (ref: yes)					−2.022*	1.046
Reference: Household income €3000–<€4000						
<€1500					6.328***	1.765
€1500–<€2000					1.971	1.720
€2000–<€3000					3.383**	1.379
€4000–<€5000					2.163	1.539
≥€5000					−0.159	1.504
No information					3.651*	1.991
Eastern Germany (ref: Western Germany)					−3.694***	1.234
Reference: Vocational training or upper secondary school-leaving qualification						
No vocational qualification					−4.241	2.893
University degree					1.142	1.033
Respondent's attitudes						
Reference: low risk of becoming unemployed within 12 months <sup>a</sup>						
High					−0.382	1.410
No information					−0.285	1.958
The individual is not to blame for unemployment <sup>b</sup> (ref: agree)					−1.324	1.239
Every unemployed person has the power to change their own professional situation <sup>c</sup> (ref: agree)					4.897***	0.940

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Fixed effects		Random effects		Random effects	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Respondent's labour market history 2013–2018						
Years in employment					−0.129	0.339
Years receiving unemployment benefits					−0.381	1.486
Years receiving means-tested basic income					−0.499	0.984
Years seeking a job					−0.306	0.928
Last position part-time (ref: no)					0.644	1.180
Daily wage rate in last position					−0.015	0.010
Respondent's benefit receipt during life (until the end of 2018)						
Unemployment benefits (ref. yes)					0.266	1.061
Means-tested basic income support (ref: no)					3.153**	1.389
Control for vignette position	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Additional control variables	No		No		Yes	
Constant	21.194***	0.285	21.203***	0.535	22.357***	2.738
Observations (vignettes)	3989		3989		3989	
Respondents	998		998		998	
Pseudo $R^2$ (overall)	0.010		0.010		0.138	
Pseudo $R^2$ (within)	0.172		0.172		0.172	
Pseudo $R^2$ (between)	0.000		0.000		0.136	

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Additional control variables: political preferences (compared to the reference—Green party—, supporters of the left-wing political party DIE LINKE granted five additional months on average, and those who did not indicate their preference, three more months).

<sup>a</sup>Respondents' assessment; 1 = very high, quite high; 0 = quite low, very low.

<sup>b</sup>1 = completely disagree, tend to disagree; 0 = partly/partly, somewhat agree, completely agree.

<sup>c</sup>1 = completely agree, somewhat agree; 0 = partly/partly, tend to disagree, completely disagree.

respondents' labour market biographies had no statistically significant effect.

On average, women were less generous than men, and respondents without children were less generous than respondents with at least one child. East Germans perceived a considerably shorter maximum benefit duration as fair than did West Germans, which runs counter to previous findings that East Germans are more in favour of redistribution and more likely to support state provision of financial security for the unemployed than West Germans (e.g., Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007; Fuchs-Schündeln & Schündeln, 2020). Moreover, we found evidence for detailed information on the maximum entitlement period having an anchoring effect. Respondents who received information about the maximum benefit period of 12–24 months chose considerably shorter maximum benefit durations than respondents who were only informed of the maximum entitlement period at the age of 50 (15 months). This effect is highly significant and amounts to almost 4 months.

## DISCUSSION

This article investigated the impact of different activities during the life course on deservingness perceptions of older unemployed people. In a factorial survey experiment conducted among a random sample of people drawn from German administrative employment records, we examined the maximum duration of benefit receipt which was perceived as fair for older unemployed persons with different biographies and different personal circumstances.

The findings of our factorial survey experiment demonstrate that perceptions of fairness do not solely reflect the rules institutionalised by the current legislation. Whereas all fictitious benefit recipients described in our vignettes could potentially receive unemployment benefits for the same amount of time (15 months), the respondents in our survey considerably varied their judgements as to what constituted a fair benefit duration depending on the biography and the individual circumstances of the fictitious benefit recipient. We found strong support for a

longer maximum benefit duration as a function of cumulative contributions to the unemployment insurance system over the course of the fictitious individual's life. This finding is in line with the results of other factorial surveys where fictitious benefit recipients who had been continuously employed were granted more generous benefits than those who had been employed irregularly or had had several episodes of unemployment (Osiander et al., 2022; Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019).

Furthermore, our results indicate that certain activities during an individual's life course may equally signal deservingness. If the unemployed 50-year-old person described in our vignettes had raised children over the course of their life, respondents regarded longer maximum benefit durations as fair. Whereas self-employment does not justify longer maximum benefit receipt in the eyes of our respondents, parenting and self-employment in combination with further training are seen as activities which justify longer periods of benefit receipt. This is remarkable given that according to the current legislation, none of these activities increases the duration of potential unemployment benefit receipt. The results suggest that public judgements regarding welfare deservingness of older unemployed people are based on a broad definition of reciprocity. Besides previous financial contributions to the community of those insured and behaviour suggesting readiness to work in return for benefit receipt, certain activities signalling a positive work ethos or contributions to society as a whole are considered to merit more generous public support.

One interesting result is that fictitious benefit recipients who had to live off their own savings after their unemployment benefits expired were granted longer maximum periods of benefit receipt than were recipients who had to apply for means-tested basic income after insurance benefits expired. Basic income may be considerably lower for welfare recipients than unemployment benefits are, and benefits are conditional on the recipients accepting any job offer even if the level of earnings, the required education or the working conditions are less favourable than in their previous jobs. Nonetheless, respondents perceived those individuals who had savings to live off as more deserving of a longer maximum benefit duration than those who had to rely on means-tested benefits. Savings thus seem to represent an important dimension of the recipient's life achievement, and the respondents may have interpreted them as an indicator of a positive attitude towards work and towards making provisions for the future.

The findings apply to a specific institutional setting, the German unemployment insurance system. Basic deservingness perceptions show commonalities across countries and social categories, but the importance given to different

deservingness criteria varies across social-structural categories (Jeene et al., 2014) and across different benefit schemes stressing different normative principles (Laenen, 2018). It seems plausible to assume that a nexus between previous contributions and the maximum duration of unemployment benefits is supported in continental welfare states with a social insurance tradition. Given the considerable differences in the lengths of employment and/or contribution required for benefit receipt (see e.g., Venn, 2012: p. 15), however, perceptions about a fair maximum benefit duration are likely to vary in detail. Moreover, shared normative expectations as to what constitutes a 'good' employment biography are also likely to play a role. Comparatively long interruptions for women as a result of having children, for example, have been common in West Germany and still are in some parts (e.g., Trappe et al., 2015). In the German pension insurance system, with its intertemporal redistribution mechanism, credits for bringing up children were first introduced in 1986 and subsequently extended and increased in value (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002: p. 104).

Moreover, it should also be taken into account that at the time of the survey, the unemployment rate in Germany was very low. While in times of mass unemployment it seems likely that older unemployed people are not to blame for their situation, in times of low rates of unemployment characteristics of the older unemployed person or performance characteristics may be more important than general ideas of solidarity. The investigation should be repeated during an external economic crisis in order to be able to observe possible effects of this kind.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As the data underlying our analysis are not completely proprietary, access to the data is restricted. The data we use are social data. They contain sensitive information and are subject to confidentiality regulations. Obtaining access to the data through the research data centre of the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) requires a contract with IAB. We will support researchers interested in replicating the results with the required formalities to receive data access.

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE A1** Impact of recipients' characteristics on the maximum benefit entitlement period (in months) considered fair: Interaction effects of gender and activities during the life course

	Coefficient	SE
Recipient in scenario		
Female (ref.: male)	0.895**	0.419
Activities during the life course (ref: no information)		
Raising children	2.231***	0.420
Raising children + further training	1.196***	0.409
Self-employed	0.619	0.376
Self-employed + further training	0.833**	0.421
Unemployed	−0.776*	0.425
Unemployed + further training	0.082	0.380
Gender (ref.: male) × activities during the life course (ref.: no information)		
Female × raising children	−0.277	0.549
Female × raising children + further training	0.363	0.600
Female × self-employed	−1.220**	0.528
Female × self-employed + further training	−0.474	0.584
Female × unemployed	0.060	0.581
F+emale × unemployed + further training	−0.006	0.542
Lengths of employment (ref.: 17 years during previous 28 years)		
Employed for 22 years	2.463***	0.244
Employed for 27 years	3.348***	0.244
Gender (ref.: male) × lengths of employment (ref.: 17 years)		
Female × employed for 22 years	−0.613*	0.340
Female × employed for 27 years	0.025	0.357
Means-tested benefits after expiry (ref.: using savings to cover living costs after unemployment benefits expire)	−0.542***	0.143
Constant	21.140***	0.572
Observations (vignettes)	3989	
Respondents	998	
Pseudo $R^2$ (overall)	0.010	
Pseudo $R^2$ (within)	0.177	
Pseudo $R^2$ (between)	0.000	

Notes: Random effects model, \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Additional control variable: vignette position.

Source: Authors' own calculations.