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# Experiencing long-term unemployment in Europe: an introduction

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| Abstract | This chapter introduces the aims and scope of the book. The focus is on the everyday life patterns of young adults who are experiencing vulnerability and precariousness and in particular the web of social relations that structures the everyday lives of long-term unemployed young people. The contributors explore whether these informal contacts provide resources and tools of solving problems, whether they are a source of pressures and expectations, and how far they shape, in general terms, the person's self-conception, identity and well-being. The introduction discusses relevant literature on these aspects and presents the methodology followed in the book, including the comparative framework of the study. | |

# Experiencing Long-Term Unemployment in Europe: An Introduction

*Christian Lahusen and Marco Giugni*

## YOUTH FACING LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT

This book examines the everyday life patterns of young adults under circumstances of vulnerability and precariousness. Its main focus is on the web of social relations that structure the everyday life of long-term unemployed young people. In particular, the contributors are interested in knowing whether these informal contacts provide resources and tools of solving problems, whether they are a source of pressures and expectations, and in how far they shape, in general terms, the person's self-conception, identity and well-being. The social sciences provide ample evidence about the precarious living situation of young jobless people in Western societies. Many studies have documented that unemployment, especially when

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it is sustained over time, brings difficulties and hardships to those affected by it, and these problems reach far beyond the immediate deprivations attributed to the loss of income. In fact, unemployment is not only associated with financial hardship; unemployed people are also confronted with social isolation owing to the loss of work-related contacts and difficulties in maintaining social relations with friends and acquaintances (Gallie et al. 2003; van Oorschot 2006), which in turn ends up reducing social capital and breaking those 'weak ties' that have been shown to be so important to get a job (Granovetter 1973). Jobless people have to struggle with the annihilation of a meaningful day structure, and leisure time becomes a tragic gift because the use of time loses purpose and direction (Jahoda et al. 1971 [1933]; Wanberg et al. 1997). At the same time, people affected by unemployment develop feelings of uselessness and dependence, are confronted with a loss of job-related identifications and personal identities (Joelson and Wahlquist 1987; Winkelmann 2009) and display lower levels of well-being. This is not an exhaustive list; many other implications could be added.

    Scholarship has stressed that these issues are true for young unemployed too (e.g., Kieselbach et al. 2001; Hammer 2003), but seem to affect them particularly deeply, given the fact that young adults are in a stage of their biographical development where they are not yet fully integrated into social life as independent citizens and autonomous individuals. Processes of socialization and individuation thus evolve within a social context defined by limitations, deprivations and stigmatizations. This necessarily has an impact on the social characteristics of this group of people, that is, their social position and status, their social relations and roles, their beliefs and behaviors, their values and identities. Scholarly writing has provided many insights into these youth-related problems, particularly by highlighting 'scarring effects', that is, long-term consequences of unemployment on the future life course of the young unemployed. We know, for instance, that experiences of unemployment among school leavers tend to increase the risks of exclusion from the labor market at later stages of their lives (Gregg 2001; Cockx and Picchio 2012). Unemployed youth might be as motivated as their more privileged peers to look for work, but they are less optimistic to find a job and get ahead in life, and their life-satisfaction is affected in the long run even by past exposure to unemployment (Clark et al. 2001; Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016). In line with these observations, evidence highlights that extended joblessness increases the risks of being exposed to mental health problems sooner or

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later (Hammer 2000; Strandh et al. 2014). Overall, prolonged joblessness increases the exposure to the experiences of marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination, and this condition provokes feelings of dissatisfaction, boredom, uselessness, shame, resignation and distress—with detrimental effects on the person's self-conception and identity.

Long-term unemployment, however, does not produce these effects automatically and deterministically. Research has highlighted that joblessness is harmful especially in conjunction with other social traits that might involve deprivations as well (e.g., social class, ethnic background, single parenthood, gender). At the same time, we know that long-term unemployment does not generate harmful and scarring effects inescapably, because these effects may be moderated by certain factors. For example, young jobless people are less affected by unemployment related risks (e.g., poverty, mental disorders, isolation) when equipped with higher educational credentials and qualifications, a secure financial situation, institutional support, and/or higher rates of self-esteem (Kieselbach 2003; Broman et al. 2001). In this regard, scholarly writing has recurrently addressed the importance of social support (Gore 1978; Jackson 1988; Beck et al. 2005; Lorenzini and Giugni 2011; Huffman et al. 2015). Relatives, friends and acquaintances are important pillars of the jobless' everyday life because they provide assistance in emotional, financial and material terms. Peer groups, local communities and neighborhoods offer young jobless a sense of home and an arena of communication and activity. And voluntary associations (sport or leisure clubs, welfare associations and the like) provide opportunities for recreation, networking, information and active involvement in community affairs or political matters.

Social support is therefore an important topic when addressing youth unemployment as an individual reality and collective problem. Most studies devoted to the analysis of youth unemployment have dealt with this topic in some way, thus corroborating the significance of this aspect of young people's lives (Jahoda et al. 1971; Kronauer 1998; Kieselbach et al. 2001; Hammer 2000; Beck et al. 2005). This book puts social support and the young jobless' webs of social relations at center stage. This is necessary to unfold the topic in its inherent complexity and richness. Several research questions will be addressed: In how far does social support attenuate the detrimental effects of unemployment, and which kind of social relations are of particular importance? Do social support networks suffer in case of extended exposure to unemployment, and how do young jobless cope with shrinking webs of social relations? Are networks of social

support equally important in different countries, and are they exposed to similar challenges everywhere? Are all young jobless adults in a similar position, or can we identify differences between various groups when considering gender, class, household structure and other features?

## UNEMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

The relationship between unemployment and social support is a complex one, and a closer look at this relationship uncovers a number of inter-relations and interactions that require in-depth analysis. On the one hand, it is true that social support is a factor that moderates the harmful effects of unemployment on the jobless' daily lives (Gore 1978; Thoits 1995; Kieselbach 2003; Broman et al. 2001; Lorenzini and Giugni 2011; Huffman et al. 2015). Family members, friends and acquaintances are very often a source of resources that enable young unemployed to live a decent, possibly also normal, life. Families, peer groups or neighborhoods reproduce a feeling of belongingness, and thus offer an important antidote or vaccine to social isolation, psychological distress and a worsening outlook on the future. On the other hand, joblessness does have detrimental effects on young people's social relations, too. The risk of social isolation seems to be particularly pronounced in the period of transition from youth to adulthood. Young people are in a process of transition between school and work, between their family of origin and their own web of social relations (peers, partnership, parenthood, etc.). Under these circumstances, long-term unemployment impedes the enlargement of social networks into the area of work-related contacts and acquaintances. At the same time, unemployed young adults report about the loss of social activities within their immediate environment, owing to the lack of resources or shame, and this (in)voluntary withdrawal decreases the number of contacts to peers, friends and acquaintances. In this situation, the family is very often the most persistent bulwark against social isolation. However, while most young people count on the help of their families, this support is not only experienced as a blessing but also as a problem of dependence, which can inhibit personal development. Moreover, the erosion of social relations and the dependence on restricted social networks can go hand in hand with lower levels of trust in public authorities, local communities and/or one's fellow citizens. If unemployment and deprivation are a collective experience within family networks, peer groups or neighborhoods, their marginalizing impact might even have an imperative quality.

Overall, these findings and observations attest considerable problems and hardships related to long-term unemployment. Scholars have proposed various theoretical concepts to better understand the patterns and dynamics associated to this situation; for instance, by treating joblessness as an aspect of social deprivation or marginalization (e.g., Townsend 1987; Gallie 2004). Since the 1990s, researchers have adopted the concept of social exclusion in order to describe the underlying social condition unemployed people are exposed to (e.g., Atkinson and Davoudi 2000; Kronauer 1998; Welshman 2007; Kieselbach et al. 2001; Giugni and Lorenzini 2013). The concept has two merits. On the one hand, it allows us to subsume the various problems and hardships associated with unemployment under one overarching concept. On the other hand, it enables us to understand the situation of deprivation in its structural relations towards society. Social exclusion entails a limited access to valuable resources (schools and education, jobs and income, cultural institutions and goods, etc.) and a restricted participation in societal life. Scientists usually subdivide the notion of exclusion into a number of different fields, within which these resources are distributed: the labor market (employment), the economy (money and consumption), public institutions (educational credentials), culture (shared norms and lifestyles), social life (contacts), politics (political interest representation) and others (Kronauer 1998; Kieselbach 2003). These scholars take up a basic idea of differentiation theory and argue that exclusion is patterned according to the various sectors or fields of society (educational system, labor market, institutionalized politics, civil society, culture, etc.). These observations raise our awareness for limited and insulated forms of deprivation (e.g., joblessness amongst privileged young people, such as the highly educated), but also for cumulative and mutually reinforcing forms of social exclusion (e.g., the 'underclass' or underprivileged groups at the fringes of society in general). They enable research to address interrelations and interactions that increase the risk of social exclusion as much as they open the door for an analysis of moderating effects and mechanisms.

While the concept of social exclusion has merits, we need to use it with caution. To begin with, it oversimplifies structural relations by focusing on the question of insiders and outsiders, even though deprivation is a rather relative term and covers a range of dynamic processes of marginalization and victimization. Moreover, it conceptualizes and analyzes the situation of the long-term unemployed from the perspective of the insiders, that is, those 'included' in social life. Jobless people are those who lack

the resources fully integrated persons have. Basically, the notion therefore has a middle-class bias, because it is the latter who normally have access to (higher) education, good jobs and income, who are members of associations and participate in institutionalized politics, who buy and read books, go to concerts and thus are culturally active. However, we have to ask whether this focus might also limit our perception of what long-term unemployment means to young adults. Does this 'inverse' perspective on joblessness enable us to learn about the specific experiences, living conditions and life forms of jobless people? What do we know apart from the deficiencies, deprivations and hardships constitutive of their socio-economic situation? A closer look at the life-worlds, lived experiences, daily routines and coping-strategies of jobless young adults seems necessary to answer these questions. This is particularly important because we are speaking of a very broad range of people with very different backgrounds, life conditions and forms of coping. An analysis of their living conditions needs to take this diversity into account.

In recent years, research has devoted more attention to these issues. Unemployment is a factor that increases the risk of social exclusion, but does not determine it, given the multiplicity of factors (e.g., household structure and housing, class background, gender role models, single parenthood, disabilities or caregiving), which increase or decrease the young jobless' vulnerability (Ranci 2010). At the same time, research has borrowed concepts and arguments from the psychologists' and psychiatrists' long-standing inquiry into individual resilience and coping strategies. Both concepts try to grasp the ability of individuals to subsist in adverse circumstances, to deal effectively with problems and to recover from misfortune. Psychologists have listed a number of protective factors or attributes guaranteeing resilience, such as optimism, perceptions of control, self-efficacy and active coping (Rutter 1987; Lee et al. 2012). These debates are of particular relevance to our study insofar as they have tended to stress more prominently the importance of behavioral aspects and the individual's social environment (Moorhouse and Caltabiano 2007; Rutter 2012). Coping has thus become a focal point of analysis, as scholars try to grasp better the efforts of disadvantaged individuals to manage adversities (Compas et al. 2001). In the case of unemployment, researchers have been interested in understanding the way the jobless learn to live with extended joblessness, how they compensate for the loss of work, income and recognition, and how they try to maintain a decent life (Beck et al. 2005). Social support is one of the key protective factors and coping resources discussed

recurrently by these authors (Thoits 1995; Compas et al. 2001; Lee et al. 2012). These indications require qualification, though, because resilience and coping might be affected by unemployment and social deprivation in the long run, too. Moreover, studies have shown that social support by partners, relatives or friends is not always helpful in overcoming stressful situations or mental health problems when considering the potential mismatch between recipients' and providers' views and needs (Lehman et al. 1986; Harris 1992). Their behavior might even have detrimental effects on well-being and job-seeking activities (Ratcliff and Bogdan 1988; Maddy et al. 2015).

Thus, previous research urges us to have a closer look at the specific situations and experiences of young unemployed people. The long-term unemployed we interviewed belong to an administrative category (the registered long-term unemployed) that does not necessarily share the same social condition. Some of the interviewed young adults, for instance, worked informally and sporadically or had other sources of income; others were economically inactive but fully involved in caregiving in their families; and others were inactive in all senses. Moreover, the type and extent of social support also diverged considerably between those who had a rather wide and dense network of social relations, those who had intense contact to a few relatives and friends, and some who were strongly marginalized and insulated. Finally, we will see that the help they received was very different in scope and type, and not always free of pressures and conflicts. Against this backdrop, we wish to dig deeper into the everyday life of long-term young jobless people in order to identify similar patterns and distinct groupings. This opens up the way to further questions: How do jobless young adults experience their living situation? How do they organize their lives within the external limitations imposed by their long-term unemployment, and which forms of coping or problem-solving do they develop? Do they develop stable forms of living within a precarious condition? How strongly can they shape their living conditions at all? And do these patterns of everyday life diverge considerably between various groups of jobless people?

## A Note on Data and Methods

Methodologically, this book studies the experience of young long-term unemployed adults in comparative and qualitative perspective. It presents findings from a comparative research project titled 'Youth, Unemployment,

and Exclusion in Europe: A Multidimensional Approach to Understanding the Conditions and Prospects for Social and Political Integration of Young Unemployed' (YOUNEX) funded by the European Commission through the 7th Framework Programme and covering six European cities: Cologne (Germany), Geneva (Switzerland), Karlstad (Sweden), Kielce (Poland), Lyon (France) and Turin (Italy). The selection of the six cities relied on a number of criteria relating to the objectives of the larger project. One of them was to compare local situations across countries characterized by different welfare systems and more specifically different 'youth unemployment regimes' (Cinalli and Giugni 2013). Within each country, we then picked a city where unemployment was high when compared to the national average, in order to guarantee a sufficiently extended population of potential respondents with enough internal variation. Within each city, we recruited very different respondents considering socio-demographic traits (such as gender, age, household structure, migration background, educational attainment) in order to map the experiences of unemployment in a comprehensive manner. This sampling strategy conforms to standards of qualitative inquiry (Charmaz 2000; Glaser 1992; Miles et al. 2014; Mills et al. 2006) and is not oriented to guarantee representativeness, but rather to inductively develop theoretical conclusions on the basis of a sufficiently differentiated and complex sample. While our findings cannot be generalized directly to the entire population of young long-term unemployed in the city or country, they do reflect important aspects of the experiences of unemployment in local and national contexts.

An important part of the research work has consisted of a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young long-term unemployed conducted in each of these cities in 2010, that is, in times of economic crisis in most of the countries. The interview guidelines aimed at stimulating the young people to speak freely about various aspects of their daily lives, including such topics as the patterns of daily life, finances, contacts and social support, relations to public authorities, voluntary associations, and politics, job aspirations and future prospects. In each city, 25–30 interviews of about 60–90 minutes were conducted with young people aged between 18 and 30 and who were unemployed for at least 12 months at the time of the interview, following a sample strategy that tried to grasp the variety of experiences (gender, age, ethnic and educational background, etc.). All the interviewees freely accepted to participate and were informed about the purposes of the research. In addition, their anonymity was ensured as their real names have not been used in reporting their answers.

Data retrieval and analysis followed principles of exploratory, qualitative and inductive research and adapted various guidelines of Grounded Theory (Glaser 1992; Miles et al. 2014; see also Charmaz 2000, 2006; Mills et al. 2006). The comparative approach was particularly revealing in order to identify similarities and differences, while the qualitative and inductive methodology was of particular importance to listen more carefully to the multidimensionality and complexity of the issues under analysis. It enabled us to detect the intricate interrelations between long-term unemployment as an individual reality, the networks of social support within which young jobless are embedded, and the specific constraints tied to their unemployment status and the welfare systems they are part of as citizens of different European cities.

The explorative and inductive approach of our comparative data retrieval and analysis was particularly helpful in addressing the social conditions of young jobless in a comprehensive and systematic manner. On the one hand, we were able to draw a more differentiated picture of unemployment, vulnerability and social exclusion amongst young long-term unemployed people. While our analyses corroborate the conclusion of scholarly writing that unemployment is associated with problems of social marginalization, they show that this relationship is not at all deterministic. This is true because jobless do shape their living conditions in some way, for instance by coping, adapting or resigning. At the same time, we were able to consider the impact of structural constraints and social classifications. Our inquiries show that the extent to which jobless adults are able to cope with their situation and the ways they do so is also influenced by their specific employment history, their gender roles, their social class or ethnic background, their household structure and family status, amongst other factors. In this regard, the comparison of individual respondents' life conditions and activities is particularly telling. These comparisons show, for example, that the experience of long-term unemployment differs significantly between men and women, between young people living with their children and those living alone, between those with a middle-class background when compared to those with a working-class background.

On the other hand, our qualitative approach followed comparative aims in order to advance knowledge about the social reality of young long-term unemployed adults in different European cities. The analyses offered in the chapters that follow show strong similarities between the situations of young long-term unemployed across the cities under study. However, differences emerge as well when addressing the specific experiences young

324  adults make during their unemployment, the way they organize their
325  everyday life and the amount and type of social support they receive. Some
326  of these differences are related, for instance, to the moderating role of
327  the family, the stigmatization of unemployment in the private and pub-
328  lic sphere, the relations young adults maintain with state authorities such
329  as unemployment agencies. These findings also mirror the differences
330  between the cities, because they are related to specificities of the cultural,
331  institutional and social context of these localities.

## 'UNITED IN DIVERSITY?' A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON A COMMON THEME

334  Scholarly writing has given various reasons why informal networks are
335  important for young adults' everyday life. Studies of social capital have
336  repeatedly highlighted that the number and type of contacts to family
337  members, friends and acquaintances has an impact on the inclusion of indi-
338  viduals into social life (Putnam 2000; Stolle 2007). Moreover, they propa-
339  gate the adoption and diffusion of 'civic' norms that tie individuals to local
340  communities and larger societies (Putnam 1992). In another reading of
341  the same concept, informal networks are a source of social capital insofar as
342  they enable individuals to mobilize the potential resources their social con-
343  tacts have (e.g., funds, information, further contacts, work, institutional
344  access points). Social capital provides them with help to reproduce or
345  improve their living conditions (Bourdieu 1980; Bourdieu and Wacquant
346  1992; Jackson 1988; Morris and Irwin 1992). Finally, informal networks
347  are also important instances of socialization. Depending on the living con-
348  ditions and experiences of these contacts, they might bring about distinct
349  group norms, ideas and aspirations, which deviate more or less explic-
350  itly from dominant expectations and ideals propagated by politics, state
351  authorities or public opinion (Whyte 1943; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Bay
352  and Blekesaune 2002; Baron 2008; Hobbins and Lahusen 2015).
353      Social relations have thus considerable effects on the everyday life of
354  young jobless people, even though the specific influence will vary accord-
355  ing to the number and type of contacts they maintain. They therefore
356  require systematic inspection. For this purpose, we propose to answer
357  three major analytic research questions. First, it will be necessary to under-
358  stand the structuring impact of long-term unemployment on the web of
359  social relations. From scholarly writing we know that unemployment can
360  have a limiting or destructive impact on social capital, particularly if we

are speaking of a long-term situation of joblessness (Jackson 1988; Morris and Irwin 1992). Available evidence, however, argues that this relation is mediated by social and cultural factors that might vary across countries (Gallie et al. 2003). Hence, it is necessary to listen more carefully to the potentially 'destructive' factors or forces. Is income the main problem; that is, do jobless young adults report that the lack of funds leads to a loss of shared activities and personal relations? Is the loss of experiences, purposes and aspirations a problem; that is, do these adults observe a loss of commonalities with their families and peers? Or is the public stigma of joblessness the cause; that is, do the respondents withdraw from personal contacts because of prejudices or personal feelings of shame? These factors and forces might not be equally relevant for all kinds of unemployed people in all countries. Indeed, the destructive impact of unemployment might vary between the various groups of young adults interviewed, for instance when taking gender roles and social class, and therefore differing expectations of men and women, of middle-class and working-class youth into account. At the same time, it will be necessary to consider whether these destructive forces vary between the residents of the various cities analyzed, given the fact that financial hardships, forms of sociability and cultural expectations will diverge between European cities when taking their different welfare systems and the institutionalized norms and ideas into consideration (Esping-Anderson 1990; Sainsbury 1999; Gallie and Paugam 2000).

Secondly, we wish to reconstruct how young people try to cope with the hardships imposed by unemployment on their everyday life. In particular, we wish to understand the ways in which they try to reproduce and upkeep informal networks of social relations within a situation of material deprivation and cultural stigmatization. In the first instance, we will be interested to observe which types of social relations are strong and robust, and which the more feeble and precarious. There are indications that the family of origin provides a solid net of social relations that young unemployed adults can rely upon under all circumstances, while friends and acquaintances are less prone to maintain their ties under situations of stress (Jackson 1988; Morris and Irwin 1992). However, this observation does not need to be true for all jobless people, because it disregards the personal preferences, skills and resources that different jobless adults might have or lack. An inductive analysis must therefore be particularly interested in identifying the resources and strategies used by the unemployed to (re)construct social relations under circumstances

of precariousness. If a lack of income is an inescapable reality for many jobless young people, do they develop strategies of cashless forms of sociability and networking to uphold social relations, or do they stress austerity and retreat? If the lack of work experiences and purposes is a fact, do they reduce expectations and resign to inactivity, or do they center on private, leisure-related, civic or political purposes of sociability and networking? If stigmatization and discrimination are part of a lived experience, do they retreat or do they sort out contacts and work on resilient relations? In all these cases, jobless young adults will find different answers to their situation, and it will be interesting to see whether these differences are related to social categories and context. Indeed, it is to be expected that the role of family support, for instance, will diverge between different European cities, as much as it will when considering the situation of female and male jobless individuals (Leana and Feldman 1991; Qureshi 1996).

Thirdly, we are interested in the impact social relations might have on the lived experiences of long-term unemployment with its constraints and limitations. Here, we join a long-standing research strand that has tried to substantiate the importance of social support in reducing financial hardships, ameliorating social isolation, preventing mental stress and keeping up optimism, well-being and purposeful activities towards the future (Kieselbach 2003; Compas et al. 2001; Beck et al. 2005; Huffman et al. 2015; Maddy et al. 2015). However, we also conform to the evidence generated by those studies that have highlighted the potentially unsupportive behavior of informal networks, and the related pressures and conflicts tied to the relations towards friends or relatives (Ratcliff and Bogdan 1988; Thoits 1995; Lehman et al. 1986; Harris 1992). Consequently, we must ask various questions. Do unemployed young people use contact with their families and friends in order to secure monetary support or cashless forms of exchange, and does this entail relations of dependency? Do they rely on their families and friends to organize their everyday life activities, and are job-seeking activities an expected part of that? Do their families and friends grant them the comfort and recognition they require, and is this understanding free of implicit or explicit forms of stigmatization? Also in this regard, we expect to find differences between the cities and between different groups of young jobless. We might expect, for instance, that pressures to take up a job might be higher on men than on women (Ratcliff and Bogdan 1988; Leana and Feldman 1991; Qureshi 1996), while the pressure might be more generalized in countries with

higher employment commitments, such as the Northern European countries (Wel and Halvorsen 2015).

The following chapters provide rich evidence about the living conditions of young jobless adults across Europe. They provide vivid accounts that show the detrimental effects of long-term unemployment on their everyday lives. At the same time, they assemble evidence on the ongoing efforts to subsist during these adverse circumstances, to solve some of the unemployment-related problems and to recover from misfortunes. And finally, they sensitize us for the specific limitations these young people are exposed to in their attempts to gain independence and get ahead in life. These case studies thus converge in the call to listen more carefully to their accounts, and to become aware of the specific hardships and pressures they are exposed to at a time of accelerated social transformations.

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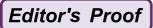
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# Author Queries

Chapter No.: 1        0002803387

| Queries | Details Required | Author's Response |
|---------|------------------|-------------------|
| AU1 | Ref. "Granovetter 1973" is cited in text but not provided in the reference list. Please provide details in the list or delete the citation from the text. | |
| AU2 | The citation "Cregg 2001" has been changed to "Gregg 2001" to match the author name/date in the reference list. Please check if the change is fine in this occurrence and modify the subsequent occurrences, if necessary. | |
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