How to apply the Capability Approach for Individuals with Discontinuous Life Courses?

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What are job seekers facing at the present time?

Because of globalization and the digital revolution of recent decades, a growing number of people are being laid off. Especially low-qualified, disadvantaged job seekers are at risk of long-term unemployment. While in past phases of change in the working society, new perspectives almost always arose for disadvantaged groups, this no longer seems likely given the current circumstances of the digital revolution. In contrast to preceding waves of modernization, neither sociopolitical nor employment policy measures can guarantee a long-term reintegration of disadvantaged job seekers into the working process.

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A range of different instruments and methods has been utilized to fight unemployment, without significantly reducing it. While up to the 1990s, most job seekers could be integrated into some kind of employment – at least temporarily – these policies are proving ineffective at the beginning of the 21st century. The prospect of reintegration or employment in the first labor market has declined continuously over past years. Many job seekers rotate between phases of unemployment, employment in job creation schemes and various qualification and assessment measures organized by the employment office. Due to structural unemployment, an enduring integration into the labor market is becoming an illusion for many job seekers. A major proportion of the unemployed will continue to move through the waiting loops of the employment and qualification institutions and not accomplish re-entry into employment on the first labor market.

Economic and social changes are causing an increasing release of individuals from social determination (Beck 1986; 2000, Galuske 2002). This individualization is what characterizes the modern society of digital capitalism (Böhnisch/Schöer 2002). These processes of change mark the starting point for the prognosis on the end of the society of full employment (cf. compare Giddens 1999, Negt 2008, Gorz 2000). Rifkin's assumption "The end of employment and its future" (1995) is currently being confirmed. Individuals are increasingly discharged; employment changes continuously. This will result in an incessant segregation on the labor market and a broad exclusion of disadvantaged persons in the decades to come. The change in the labor society will not take place in the following generation, as was case with past change processes. Instead, it will take place within the current generation of employees – in the form of changing working conditions and demands.

The continuous adaptation to changing working conditions has been implemented in the European Employment Strategy as part of the proclamation on life-long learning. But it will also cause a further exclusion of employees who possess neither the resources and capacities for an adaptive behavior modification nor the competence to cope with the transition to a flexible working life. The dissolution of normal phases of employment forms the labor society. Discontinuity becomes normality. The rotation between diverse workfields, destandardized working conditions, and temporally flexible employment is becoming an element of the employment biography. This change to a high-risk reality of life can cause a permanent withdrawal from working life, especially for persons in precarious employments. Work and societal integration, or rather participation, lose meaning for the identification of individuals with the labor-focused model of society in the second (digital) modern era.

The coping strategies needed during these transition phases, as well as a flexible adaptation to changing circumstances and occupational perspectives, become key competencies during discontinuous employment courses. The former occupational fixation after successfully overcoming the first and second transition phases is being replaced by a flexible arrangement of changing conditions on the labor market: the capability to cope with unemployed phases and the flexible (re-)integration in new working conditions. The delimitation of occupational socialization and traditional occupations, as well as the transitions between unemployment and the first, second, or third labor markets, require the existence or provision of resources for a flexible arrangement. Because of a lack of financial, social, or psychological resources in this delimited labor society, coping is connected with a high risk of social deprivation, especially for educationally disadvantaged persons. The adaptation to changing working conditions is a must to ensure their livelihood.

Due to the growing number of discontinuous employment biographies, coping with unemployment is moving toward the center of attention of sociopolitical strategies. Services involved in labor market politics work within a field of conflict between placement-focused qualification and a holistic, pedagogical orientation toward coping with precarious employment biographies. Moreover, qualification, training, and placement into a regular employment cannot be realized for all individuals.

How to cope with structural unemployment?

Facing the circumstances described, the following questions arise: How to cope with structural unemployment, and which capabilities have to be guaranteed by society?

Until now, there are no standardized methods and instruments to measure resources and competencies to cope with unemployment and unstable life courses that have been adapted to a Luxemburgish population of job seekers. Thus it seems meaningful to analyze how coping with unemployment and coping with instabilities in the employment biography can be enhanced and measured. A measurement of coping competencies is especially important, because the resources and competencies to cope with precarious situations in life are distributed very unequally.

Thus the goal of Inter-Actions is to develop an instrument to assess coping competence. Its theoretical background is based mainly on concepts from the capability approach first elaborated by the popular economist and political philosopher Amartya Sen.

Moving beyond the concept of employability – the capability approach as a call for new instruments

As an alternative to the human capitalistic model of employability, the capability approach by the Indian economist-philosopher and Nobel prize laureate Amartya Sen does not just focus on the utility of resources and abilities for their usage-oriented application on the labor market (Sen 2000: 348 ff; Dean et al.: 5ff). Sen extends the approach of usage maximization, "rational choice" (Rawls 2009; Sen 200: 339; Sen 2003: 19; Nussbaum 2001: 88ff) by trusting in not only thinking of individual advantage but also the societal sense of responsibility for all individuals. The realization of individual goals requires the societal access ("process aspect of freedom") and equal opportunities ("opportunity aspect of freedom") that enable options for freedom of choice (Sen 2003: 5; Sen 200: 28f). "Sen's primary use in the notion of capability is to indicate a space within which comparisons of quality of life (…) are most fruitfully made. Instead of asking about people's satisfactions or how much in the way of resources they are able to command, we ask, instead, about what they are actually able to do or to be" (Nussbaum 2001: 12). By this definition, poverty, unemployment, and social disadvantages are not reduced to lacking access to income, but are a consequence of a lack of freedom. In the sense of the availability of access and ability to trade, this freedom is defined as "capability" (Sen 2000).

This is not only a theory of distributive justice encompassing the access to goods like living space, nutrition, education, work, healthcare, or culture. In fact, the approach discusses whether, on the societal macrolevel, all humans are provided with the material, institutional, and societal premises that enable a successful life (Otto/Ziegler 2008: 9ff). Based on this model, Martha Nussbaum developed a catalogue of ten criteria (Nussbaum 2001: 77ff). "Most importantly, Sen has never made a list of the central capabilities" (Nussbaum 1999: 86). This "list of capabilities" presents a catalogue of claims, or rather, a test catalogue, to capacitate all citizens to a self-determined, good life (Nussbaum 1999: 86). This capability to a good life (Grundmann 2008: 132) is the core of the "capability approach."

In any consistent application of this concept, all job seekers have to be offered jobs, or rather employment, in order to assure their existence (Zimmermann 2004).

The model of coping competence

According to the coping concept of Lazarus (Lazarus 2006: 101ff), individuals have to be empowered to (re)produce their sense of self-efficacy and to perceive themselves as the actors in their own biographies. Following this model, phases of unemployment are seen as a crisis that may cause psychological and physiological destabilization, social isolation, delinquency, and disintegration (Hurrelmann 1989; 13ff; Kieselbach/Wacker 2006).

The utilization of social resources and the strengthening of self-confidence promote a proactive way of handling unemployment. Efforts for coping with unemployment should focus on the individual resources of the persons concerned. Furthermore, the support systems, that is, counseling centers, employment offices, as well as employment and qualification institutions, should not only concentrate on compensating support efforts, but also ensure the individual's capability to cope with discontinuous biographies.

Among others, the construct of coping competence comprises the psychological construct of resilience. The term resilience is derived from the Latin word "resilire" (to rebound, to recoil). In physics, resilience is the label given to the ability of a material to bend under pressure without breaking. Thus the term is a synonym for elasticity and flexibility. Resilience incorporates the competence to deal constructively with the demands and challenges of life and to appraise them as manageable rather than threatening. Resilience is a learnable ability (Siebert 2006) that can be modified and strengthened over the life-course (Wustmann 2005).

The term salutogenesis was introduced by the American-Israeli medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky. It focuses on protective factors that defend and strengthen health and is perceived as a contrast to pathogenetic approaches. Salutogenesis essentially concentrates on the sense of coherence (SOC), which includes the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of one's own life (Antonovsky 1997). The theory assumes that the development of an SOC ends at the latest by the age of 30. In contrast, the resilience approach works with the hypothesis that resilience or coping competencies can ameliorate throughout the life-span.

Emily Werner and Ruth Smith started a study with 698 children on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, and followed them up for 40 years. Although growing up under the same circumstances, risk factors, and conditions of socialization, they found that one third of the children developed in a healthy way – despite adverse precarious life-events, health impairments, experiences of poverty, and a low parental education level. Protective factors enabled these children and adolescents to achieve healthy development even though confronted with precarious life-events.

Both the capability approach and the concept of salutogenesis are based on the provision of resources. Antonovsky describes resistance resources, which can be drawn from different areas of life (i.e. in the proximate social environment, on a societal or cultural level), whereas Sen's resources are primarily but not exclusively based on income or civil rights. Resistance

resources and capabilities are very similar: Both need a medium if an individual is to be able to use them. In the concept of salutogenesis, the SOC acts as such a medium and enables an individual to use her or his resistance resources to attain a goal. In the capability approach, conversion factors are needed to convert resources into capabilities.

Keupp, in contrast, states that capabilities are very similar to resistance resources. An explanation for these two different points of view might be that certain capabilities are required to attain other capabilities. The connection is not linear, but more circular. Thus, none of the views described above can be rejected as being wrong. Both can be integrated into a circular model.

Furthermore, Keupp (2009) points out that Antonovsky names sociostructural and political processes as important prerequisites for resistance resources. Thus, the focus is on the connection between an individual's agency and the enabling structures that need to be created on a societal level. Sen made a very similar statement: "Indeed, individual agency is, ultimately, central to addressing these deprivations. On the other hand, the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us. There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom" (Sen 2000, p. XI). The 13th child and youth report to the German Federal Government concluded that the capability approach and the concept of salutogenesis share a common view on the promotion of health. A human being is a self-determined individual who is capable of acting and who requires and uses certain resources to cope with stressful demands in order to maintain or regain health. It is the duty of the institutions to directly enhance the resources of the persons concerned and to create structures that empower individuals to make use of their rights and to render them more capable of acting (Sen 1975: 38).

Another important component of coping competence is perceived self-efficacy (Bandura 1977). Perceived self-efficacy describes the expectation that one will be able to execute actions successfully on the basis of one's own competencies. One component of perceived self-efficacy is the concept of locus of control. Established by Rotter (1966), it measures an individual's beliefs regarding how far events can be influenced. A locus of control is internal when an individual attributes an event as the consequence of own behavior, while a locus of control is external when this event is appraised as being independent of one's own behavior or control.

An additional dimension of coping competence is the concept of coping. Coping describes a strategy needed to overcome critical life-events. Richard Lazarus defined the term in the 1960s (Lazarus 1966, Psychological stress and the coping process, New York). The coping concept contains activities and efforts to deal with adverse situations (Lazarus & Launier 1978). The stress theory of Lazarus assumes that the appraisal of an adverse situation depends on the extent to which one disposes of the resources to successfully overcome it (Lazarus 1991, Emotion and adaptation).

Another dimension of coping competence is the modern concept of empowerment. In Social Work, this term is used as a positive notion for available resources and competencies. Empowerment is also described as self-competence. The social scientist Julian Rappaport defined the term for the first time in 1985. It integrates the word power – power which is supposed to be used to empower individuals to use their resources for a successful life-management (Herriger 1997). This empowers persons to cope with problems in critical stages of life in an effective and self-determined way. Empowerment also incorporates the opportunity to strengthen humans so that they will rediscover their resources and competencies and use them for a successful life. Empowerment allows the persons concerned

to see themselves as engineers of their own life-worlds and to arrange their lives in a self-determined way. The term describes "a self-initiated and self dependent process of (re)creation of sovereignty on the level of everyday relationships, but also on the level of political participation and creation power" (Herriger 1997:14).

Empowerment processes enable the persons concerned to solve problems or rather to escape from an attitude of helplessness and determine their life-situation on their own. Empowerment also encompasses the issue of resources that has received a lot of attention. Therefore, empowerment is an activating process characterized by participation opportunities, self-responsibility, and autonomy.

An instrument to measure coping competence

The concepts described above served as the theoretical background for the development of an instrument to assess internal resources and competencies for coping with critical life-events. We derived the dimensions it examines from the scientific literature on coping with critical life-events and from interviews with experts from the Social Work sector in Luxembourg. We labeled the constructs to be assessed interaction capacity, self-fulfillment orientation, diversity of perspectives, and positiveness. The relevance of the operationalized dimensions is described in the context of discontinuous life courses.

The construct of interaction capacity encompasses not only competent social behavior but also a self-confident demeanor. The concept of competent social behavior taps whether an individual acts empathetically and openly toward others, whereas self-confident demeanor taps whether the individual behaves self-confidently and asserts her or his interests in the presence of others.

The construct self-fulfillment orientation is operationalized by scales on the self-reflective approach to problems and positive concept of own competence. A person with a distinctly self-reflective approach to problems addresses them actively and observes her or his behavior while doing so. The scale positive concept of own competence measures how an individual appraises her or his competence to achieve a goal.

Diversity of perspectives is operationalized by the scales creativity of goal attainment and flexible creation of the future. Creativity of goal attainment measures whether an individual tries various ways to reach a set goal. The scale flexible creation of the future measures whether a person disengages from unattained goals to pursue new ones to which he or she adapts.

The construct of positiveness is divided into a healthy distance and an optimistic outlook. The scale positiveness assesses whether a person maintains an inner calm and balance despite a difficult situation. The scale optimistic outlook measures how hopefully or confidently an individual appraises her or his future.

Each scale will contain about ten items. Along with the clients' demographic variables, their aspirations and motives will be assessed during the course of the data collection.

The novelty of this instrument is that it will be available in three languages. The participants will be able to choose between Luxembourgish, German, and French. Furthermore, much attention is being paid to formulating easy-to-understand items. The next step will be to offer an auditory version of the instrument. Persons with limited reading skills will then have the opportunity to listen to the items, instead of or in addition to reading them.

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