Paradoxes of empowerment in labour market activation

Findings from a narrative study about vocational rehabilitation of people with disabilities in the Netherlands

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The rhetoric of empowerment has disempowering consequences for clients and professionals in vocational rehabilitation programmes.

This paradox is an unintended consequence of:

– Norms and expectations embedded in vocational rehabilitation programmes
– Professional accountability frameworks
Let’s work!

• Activating welfare states
  – Focus on labour market participation
  – the Netherlands: Participation Act

• Vocational rehabilitation support under discussion
  – Goal & Effectiveness

• Overlooked:
  How does vocational rehabilitation work in practice?
Focus on practices

- Practice is **no direct reflection** of policies (or theories)
- Practice has **its own normativity**: embedded assumptions and expectations

- **Stories** give insight in practices
- From the **perspectives** of the people concerned
Stories

• Powerful way to constitute an identity
• Stories as social creations (made and told in particular society)

• Stories articulate expectations embedded in practices and its consequences.

• ‘Clients’: Participating in VR programs after receiving sickness benefits for > 5 years
  – Life story interviews
• Professionals:
  – Indepth interviews about their professionals practices
Major assumptions in vocational rehabilitation support

• Training of skills

• Fostering empowerment

• Checking motivation

• Determining abilities

These assumptions have unintended consequences that hamper labour market activation.
Empowerment in vocational rehabilitation

‘when people possess a certain inner leadership, they are capable of self-reflection and have the capacity to make an informed, independent decision. With this increased autonomy, they are able to make their own choices, and these might lead to better prospects for the rehabilitation process’

‘Doing’ empowerment

• Exploration of various ways in which empowerment is ‘done’ in practice
• Different ways of ‘doing’ embody different norms
• Narratives that explicitly challenge dominant expectations of empowerment
• Five illustrative cases
Autonomy
versus
Interdependency
The goal of labour participation versus Living a Good Life
Linearity versus Erratic Process
‘All or Nothing’ versus Balancing
Reflection versus Learning by Doing
Some concluding remarks

• Empowerment as an activation strategy:
  – Understood in a **dichotomous** way
  – Psychologizing: reduced to individual characteristic
  – Disciplines both clients and professionals

• **Excludes** people from the support the need in order to feel empowered

• Taking **situated stories** of clients as starting point as a way to work towards empowerment
  – Alternative approaches that go beyond **dichotomy**
What ‘works’...

• Taking into account what it **means** in peoples’ lives to (return-to) work
  • Changing relation to body, self, society and perspectives on past, present, future **[identity work]**
• **Embodied** abilities
• **Working on the norm** of the able-bodied worker
  • Beyond logic of recovery
• **Professional leeway** and **reflection** by intervision
• **Valuing all work** done during vocational rehabilitation
Learning from practice for combating worklessness of young people with disabilities

– Making (implicit) assumptions and expectations explicit

– Learning from unintended consequences

– Articulating alternative ideals and conditions
Thank you for your attention!

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