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# Employability: significant signs of the present

**Employability has gained renewed attention in contemporary political discussions during the last ten years. The concept has emerged as a signifier which has replaced the previous way of describing the workforce, thereby producing different kinds of pictures of whom is a desirable worker. This article aims to gain a broader understanding of how discourses on employability position care workers in elderly care as responsible for their own employability. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, transnational policy texts and interview transcripts from interviews with care workers are analysed and compared. The main questions are: How are care workers in elderly care made responsible for their own employability and how does this relate to the responsibility assigned to entities such as employers and the state?**

Employability has gained renewed attention in political discussions during the last ten years (Berntsson 2008; Finn 2000; Forrier & Sels 2003; Löfgren Martinsson 2008). It has emerged as a signifier which has replaced the previous way of describing the workforce (cf. Clarke & Patrickson 2008; Kruss 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). Instead of speaking about a short-age of employment and describing people as employed or unemployed, one now speaks about a lack of employability and the citizen has come to be described as employable or not employable (Garsten & Jacobsson 2004) or in need of employability skills (cf. Williams 2005). Further, employability is currently used as an explanation, and to some extent a justification, of unemployment (Stråth 2000) and as a way to

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legitimate action programmes in a number of political policy areas, such as business, education, social welfare, labour market, and recently also including sustainable development. This kind of signification positions the citizen as responsible for her/his own conditions and less emphasis is placed on structural inequalities and problems in the labour market (cf. Fejes, 2009).

As a way to understand how employability operates in the present, this article develops a Foucauldian (Foucault 2007) understanding of such meaning formation as the result of a discursive power/knowledge production between the specific subjects constituting a certain discourse. By analysing two different practices where such meaning formation takes place – transnational policy documents and interviews with employees within elderly care – and by drawing on the concept governmentality, the aim is to analyse how care workers are made responsible for their own employability and how this relates to the responsibility assigned to entities such as employers and the state. Through such analysis, it is possible to gain a broader understanding of what employability “does” in terms of the formation of subjectivity.

The article is structured in five sections. In the first we introduce a short historical background to the emergence of the concept of employability. Secondly, we outline our theoretical framework and describe the empirical material analysed. Thirdly, transnational policy texts are analysed, followed by an analysis of interviews with care workers. We end the article with a discussion of our findings.

### **A short history of the concept of employability**

If we focus on prior research on employability, some researchers (cf. Gazier 1999; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005) argue that three different historical meanings of employability can be traced. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of employability emerged in a time of labour shortage and was understood as employment. As a way to handle such a situation, attempts were made to identify the capacity of the work force in terms of age, health, family conditions and will to work. Based on such work, the work force was categorised as either employable or not and the discussions stressed the individual capacities and motivations, though not so much individual competences (Gazier 1999). This era has been referred to as dichotomic, where the employability concept has an emergency distinction rather than being mobilised as a policy tool (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005).

During the second era (1950-60) employability started to be used as a policy concept at the national and organisational levels, especially focusing on occupational and recruitment issues, but also within social politics with its focus on socially, physically and mentally vulnerable groups (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). During this era there was a shift from regarding individuals as either employable

or not, to seeing them as more or less employable. The concept of employability was still understood in terms of employment. The suggested strategies mostly concerned labour market measures, activities and statistical collection to determine emergent needs. However, a dichotomisation emerges in terms of viewing individuals and the work force as either employed or unemployed (Garsten & Jacobsson 2004).

The third era, started during the 1980s, was further developed during the 90s and is still ongoing. The emphasis on employability has increased during this period as it entered a number of policy areas at the supranational, national, organisational and individual level simultaneously. During this era the three major players – the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), the UN (United Nations, mostly within the UNESCO) and the EU (European Union) – launched the concept of lifelong learning as a strategic umbrella concept to secure economic growth and social welfare globally and nationally. The year 1997 was designated as the European year for lifelong learning, which resulted in a European strategy for the implementation of lifelong learning in all policy areas. The goal was to secure employability, economic growth and sustainability within the union. This strategy linked employability to a number of other concepts, such as: flexibility and security (sometimes referred to as flexicurity), entrepreneurship, adaptability, matching, health, equality, etc. The third era is characterised by a more express focus on the individual and her/his preconditions and personal responsibility regarding knowledge and skills (competence focus) as well as values and attitudes (focus on social skills and adaptability) (cf. Fejes 2009). This can be seen in the shift from referring to individuals as employed or unemployed, towards referring to them as employable or not employable (Garsten & Jacobsson 2004). At the same time there is an increased interest in relations between individual and organisational capacities and possibilities structurally and culturally. The discussion also includes societal and organisational responsibility for employability. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) discuss these parallel trends as a kind of renegotiation of the contract between personal freedom and flexibility and the employers' need for a relevant competence match. During the third era employability thus changed its focus, from employment towards an emphasis on ability to participate in the labour market. Although employability is discursively connected to labour market relations, some researchers suggest a careful distinction between employment and employability (see e.g. Knight & Yorke 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay 2005). They point out that the employment focus is concerned with the dichotomy of employment versus unemployment using a demand-supply model. Employability on the other hand focuses on individuals' capacity for employment, i.e. it focuses on the suffix of the concept; *ability* in terms of competence development and identity

development. The historical development of the concept employability shows that both these understandings are embedded in the concept, but with different meanings and emphasis being highlighted in different times and contexts.

### **Analysing discourses on employability**

Our interest is directed to how discourses on employability shape certain kinds of care workers in terms of responsibility. How are care workers in elderly care made responsible for their own employability and how does this relate to the responsibility assigned to entities such as employers and the state? As a way to answer our questions we draw on a governmentality perspective combined with a discourse analysis (cf. Foucault 1972; Fejes 2006; Fejes 2008a; Fejes & Nicoll 2008). Governmentality emerged in Foucault's (2007) later writings and was developed by other researchers (cf. Dean 1999; Rose 1999). Here, government is analysed as something more complex than the government of the nation-state: it involves the government of ourselves, the government of others and the government of the state. The focus is on liberal mentalities of governing. Liberalism is not seen as an ideology that can be related to a specific political party. Instead, liberalism is here seen as a mode of governing, or ideas about how governing should be conducted.

Foucault (2007) argues that during the last few centuries, there has been a shift in how to reason about governing and how governing operates in society – from a situation in which society was planned through legislation and repression, to a situation where governing is conducted by the citizens themselves. Here, the notion of freedom is important. The governmentality of today is dependent on the freedom of the citizen. The starting point within such a rationality of governing is that the freedom of the citizen is both a prerequisite and an effect of governing. Without the freedom to choose, there is only a situation of constraint, and thus there is no governing.

There is also a different notion of the state related to such a perspective – a decentred state. The state is not an *a priori* actor who does things. Instead, it is seen here as an epistemological pattern of assumptions of how governing should operate (cf. Fejes & Nicoll 2008). In his writing, Nikolas Rose (1999) has called the contemporary state the 'enabling state'. An important aspect of such a "state" is providing the opportunity (enabling) for citizens to make choices in accordance with their wishes and desires, thus the political ambition to govern coincides with individual dreams and aspirations. Here, freedom is both the prerequisite and the output of governing.

Based on the above perspective, we focus on how employability is construed in relation to policies produced by supranational organisations, such as the OECD and the EU (OECD 1998, 2005; European Commission 2001, 2007),

where the aim is to answer questions about how care workers are positioned as responsible for their own employability and how this relates to the positioning of employers and the state. This analysis will be further elaborated through the examination of transcripts from interviews with people working in elderly care. This will provide the opportunity to compare and see how discourses that are produced in transnational policymaking are taken up and operate within local work practices. The interviews are drawn from a study of an in-service training programme for health care assistants (HCA) who wished to become licensed practical nurses (LPN). The programme was part of a major state initiative called *Steps for Skills*. It focused on raising the skills and competences of employees working in elderly care in Sweden, and was also aimed at making the occupations within health care more attractive. In this programme HCAs who had worked many years in elderly care were given the opportunity, during work hours, to participate in a process of recognition of prior learning, teaching and assessment. They would be able to receive a diploma from the health care programme at upper secondary school level, and thus be employed as LPNs (for a more elaborated description of the programme see Fejes & Andersson 2009 and for other articles within this project see e.g. Fejes 2008b; Fejes & Nicoll, forthcoming).

In all, 20 semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1996) were held with a total of 30 persons who were working within elderly care or who worked as teachers at the health care programme. Altogether, 14 HCAs, 5 LPNs, 6 managers and 5 teachers were interviewed. Of the interviews 14 were individual and 6 were group interviews conducted with 2–5 interview persons together. The focus of the interviews was on questions about participation in the in-service training programme: why one participated, how the programme was implemented, and how the programme was perceived in terms of output and quality. The purpose of the group interviews was further to elicit the available discourses on employability as such interviews – providing a setting where different lines of thought and argument may meet – might help them to further describe and problematise the issues discussed (cf. Vaughn *et al* 1996).

### **Supranational policy discourses on employability**

As mentioned earlier, employability has emerged as a policy concept in a number of different policy arenas internationally, nationally and organisationally (Berglund & Fejes 2009). At the supranational policy level employability concerns the formulation of nationwide strategies for competence resourcing to secure employment and reduce unemployment (McQuaid & Lindsey 2005). The logics of employment are thereby the basic assumption and goal of policy discourses at this level. To create prerequisites for people to have, keep and, if required, get new jobs is the foundation for creating a ‘good life’, both for society as a whole

and for its citizens. Such ideas are related to the concept of lifelong learning that positions the work force as in need of being flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. For example, as expressed in a policy text from the OECD:

Together with businesses and individuals, public authorities share a common interest in renewing and increasing the skills base of the population and workforce. Moreover, there is an increased awareness of the importance of lifelong learning in a society where economic, social and technological change call for flexibility, adaptation and learning throughout life. (OECD, 1998, p. 3)

Similar ideas are put forward by the EU:

In particular, Member States should: renew impetus in tax and benefit reforms to improve incentives and to make work pay; increase adaptability of labour markets combining employment flexibility and security; and improve employability by investing in human capital. (EC 2007, p. 11)

Although these organisations at a first glance might seem to draw on similar discourses in their policy formulation, there are also differences. For example, although both the OECD (1998, 2005) and the EU (2001, 2007) promote a more flexible labour market as the solution to unemployment, and both promote systems of lifelong learning and investment in human capital as a way to face the future, the OECD discourse is more economically driven. Such differences can be exemplified by the focus of the OECD on the knowledge-based economy, instead of the knowledge-based society as promoted by the EU (EC 2001). Further, according to the OECD, human capital is

the knowledge, skills, competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity... Human capital thus constitutes an intangible asset with the capacity to enhance or support productivity, innovation, and employability. (OECD 1998, p. 9)

Thus, human capital is foremost an investment in skills that can be utilised to increase economic prosperity and employability. However, it is also recognised that social issues such as equal distribution of skills are important. For example, it is stated in one of the texts from the OECD that:

recent studies show that an equitable distribution of skills has a strong impact on overall economic performance. This is an important finding, one that helps justify policies to upgrade the skills of disadvantaged groups. It also shows



that the distribution of skills is important over the long term for living standards and productivity: more equitable investments in skills can foster growth by making the overall labour force more productive. (OECD 2005, p. 1)

However, even though aspects of equality are raised, the framing for such discussions is within an economically driven discourse where the main goal is an overall good economic performance.

The economic discourse is also present in the EU policy texts. However, such a discourse is also closely related to ideas about social cohesion. For example, in the memorandum on lifelong learning it is stated that:

Overall, consensus can be surmised around the following four broad and mutually supporting objectives: personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability. That lifelong learning promotes this wide range of objectives is reflected in the extended definition below, in the light of which all references to lifelong learning in this document should be understood. (EC 2001, p. 9)

Here we can see how social inclusion and personal fulfilment are emphasised as important goals in connection with employability and lifelong learning. Even though economic goals are important, learning for personal or civic purposes is stressed as a “good” goal in itself. We can thus conclude that different supranational organisations construe the discourse on employability slightly differently, although there are discursive elements (such as economic drive forces, human capital etc.) which are part of both these discourses.

Despite the differences between the OECD and the EU discourses on employability, we can see how subjects are positioned in a similar way in terms of responsibility for their employability. In the previous quotations, we can see how flexibility and adaptability are emphasised in the OECD texts as something that is an individual characteristic. Adaptability signifies a subject who is responsible for being adaptable to new and changing circumstances in the labour market. The citizen needs to train and re-train, to be mobile and flexible as a way to be able to keep herself/himself employable. Such a connection between adaptability and employability is also clearly emphasised by the EU, which the following quotation illustrates.

In economic terms, the employability and adaptability of citizens is vital for Europe to maintain its commitment to becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based society in the world. Labour shortages and competence gaps risk limiting the capacity of the European Union for further growth, at any point in the economic cycle. (EC 2001, p. 6)

To sum up so far, discourses on employability operating in the EU and OECD documents include ideas about economic prosperity and development, social cohesion and equality, flexibility and adaptability of the citizen. Even though, as is visible in this analysis and pointed out by other researchers (cf. Jacobson 2004), there seems to be a consensus perspective promoted via these documents where the state, the employer and the individual are all positioned as being jointly responsible for creating the “good” future, where lifelong learning and investment in human capital are central, it is still the individual who is positioned as responsible for becoming adaptable and flexible as a way to become/remain employable. One could say that there is a responsabilisation of the individual. The individuals themselves need to take responsibility for using the opportunities for lifelong learning by means of education and in-service training offered by the state and the market, thus transforming themselves into an employable person. The role of the “state” is then more distanced than was previously the case (cf. Fejes & Nicoll 2008). Now, structures for supporting and enabling the individual in her/his own choices are created instead of collectively planning the future by means of legislative measures and regulations.

### **Workplace discourses on employability**

So far, we have illustrated how education and lifelong learning is presented as a central component for increased employability among the population within transnational policy texts. At the same time, the state, the employer and the individual have been positioned somewhat differently. In this section, we will analyse the discourse on employability as it is created in interviews with HCAs and LPNs within elderly care.

A statement repeated in the interview transcripts is the idea that the municipality and the private companies (where the interview persons are employed) have changed their demands on their employees. They are now demanding that all their personnel should have a diploma equal to the certificate from the health care programme at the upper secondary school level. Such a diploma is a prerequisite for the employees to be employed as LPNs (instead of being employed as HCAs). Such an idea constructs a future threat, which needs to be tackled by means of more education. In the following two statements we can see how such an idea is created.

Yes, it's because I want to be an LPN. If there is a change in the municipality or something, it would then be easier to get a new job. Now when they recruit, you have to have degree as an LPN. It's not about your competence, instead... (Marie)



I then got interested in studying. The job I have at the moment. Then I became permanently employed here at [Solhagens'] home for elderly people. Then you need the correct level of education. So I spoke with my boss and told her that I wanted to participate in this education. So it was an interest on my part. (Christine)

These statements construct a strong individual responsibility. The individuals themselves construe future threats in terms of not being able to continue as an employee in the future. Such threats should be faced by updating one's education. These statements can also be interpreted as a way of handling future risks within the framework of which competences need to be increased as a way of participating in the competition for new jobs. This idea of risk is more clearly expressed in the following quotation.

Foremost to secure your job...To secure your job in the future, to avoid being kicked out when one becomes..., I am 44 years old. If this home were privatised, I might feel that I don't want to stay here. I want to be employed by the municipality, and then I wouldn't stand a chance of getting a job in the municipality, I think, only with a HCA certificate. (Sofie)

Here we see how future threats concern the risk of the nursing home being privatised (operated by a company instead of the municipality), and the risk of not having the right qualifications. We can see a similar statement in another interview. Here we also see how privatisation is seen as a future threat.

Because I... now I believe, now I'm this old. But I think in this way, you never know with the municipality. Without notice – pofff, and then we are privatised. And it will probably not get better now when we have a right-wing government because then every nursing home should be privately run. And I believe this will lead to them saying that they only want LPNs. And I mean, it's not... it's a requirement, I understand that the requirement should be an LPN. So, partly, and then I wanted to study to become an LPN. Yes, I think it's fun! Very hard, but fun. You are happy every time you have taken an exam. (Jasmine)

This quotation illustrates that it is not only about threats and calculation of risk. It is also about an interest in in-service training. In other words, these statements construct an idea of self-responsibility. Each person should make their own calculation of risk in the future, and education can be a tool to counter those risks at

the same time as self-interest related to the educational participation is constructed.

Despite the role of self-responsibility, there is also to some extent a responsabilisation of the municipality (employer) and the state. They are the ones made responsible to make participation in in-service training possible. Several statements concern the necessity of economic support as a condition for participation in in-service training. If the in-service training for the HCAs had not taken place during paid workdays financed by the municipality and the state, participation would have been limited according to the interview transcripts. The following quotation illustrates this.

Yes, I can honestly say that I wouldn't have participated if it hadn't taken place during working hours. It was about seizing the opportunity when offered. To participate in the education. Otherwise I wouldn't have taken the initiative to apply for participation in a regular programme, thus having to take time off work to be able to study. I wouldn't have done that. (Beverly)

In these statements, there is a responsabilisation of the individual, at the same time as the individual is positioned in relation to the employer and the state. The latter two are constructed as enablers making it possible for the individuals to realise their wishes – in this case, to increase their employability, and to make something interesting and fun.

### **Stories about the present and the future of employability**

As shown, employability is nothing new, neither as a phenomenon nor a concept. During the last decade the interest for employability seems to have increased, both as a policy tool and as an object for research (Berntsson 2008; Finn 2000; Forrier & Sels 2003). The descriptions and analysis of employability and its development can in different ways contribute to our understanding of ourselves and our present time as well as how we perceive our future. Employability can therefore be thought of as a collection of stories, or signs, that taken together with other such time and context markers constitute the conceptions that are taken for granted as normal/abnormal, desirable/undesirable, moral/unmoral etc. in different contexts. Such stories express how humans and knowledge is perceived and understood in the specific context.

The historical survey shows how the contents and values of employability have changed from viewing employability from an employment perspective, where the society and employers were held responsible for the job supply, towards an increased responsabilisation of the individuals. Many researchers (see e.g. Jarvis 2007; Rose 1999; Popkewitz et al 2006; Fejes 2009) describe this dislocation of values as a transfer to a neoliberal society or an advanced liberal

society. In this kind of society the individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own lives and economical situation, e.g. by making themselves employable and attractive in the labour market. Policy rhetoric refer to such individuals as 'lifelong learners' who run their lives as enterprises and continually invest in education and learning to have the most updated competences in relation to the changing needs of the labour market (Berglund 2008; Fejes, 2008; Popkewitz et al 2006). Such policy rhetoric implies that the individual freedom is unlimited. Successful lifelong learners are construed as having an ability to regard societies and organisations as enablers rather than constraints. Policy rhetoric also constitutes the opposite – the undesirable other – who are construed as unwilling and unable to fulfill the requirements of the lifelong learner and to see the state as an enabler of freedom. They are thus construed as abnormal and in need of societal measures (Berglund 2008). For example, in the case of the elderly care workers they are through discourse positioned as responsible for their own employability. They need to be active and engage in training and re-skilling as a way of keeping their competences up to date and in accordance with what is asked by the employer. However, this does not mean that the state and the employer are positioned without any responsibility. They are instead positioned as enablers that should make it possible for the employees to make choices and participate in activities which position them as employable persons. From this perspective, the change of responsibility is hardly surprising with its shift towards the suffix *-ability* in the employability concept since it stresses the individual ability and the will to embrace an active attitude. As a result of the present discourse, collective solutions such as the existence and tasks of labour unions are challenged in the public discussion.

In terms of governance, we can thus see how discourses construed within different practices jointly produce certain ways to reason about employability. Both within discourses produced by transnational policy texts and within local work practices, the individual is being positioned as responsible for her/his own employability. As referred to previously (cf. Fejes 2009), this is a rationality that is taken up and produced by workers themselves. Thus, we can see how the notion about freedom, i.e. that you are encouraged to make your own choices in terms of participation in e.g. in-service training opportunities, or volunteer to do new work chores, is a powerful idea that operates within discourses on employability that does something in terms of governing.

This paper has contributed with a governmentality perspective on the historical survey of the employability concept. We have thus focused on telling stories of the past and present. Future stories of employability are yet to be written, but at the same time they are historicised as they are already developing through the rationalities and mentalities of both present and past discourses. Foucault

(1994) refers to such historicity as a “history of the present”, which then includes the unwritten history of the future. Yet, this is not to say that the future is already predestined. Rather, historical events overlap. Looking back it is possible to discover the discontinuities and breaks that helps cast the present in sharper relief. Or as Popkewitz (2008, XV) argues: “to make visible the internments and enclosures of the commonsense of ‘employability’ is to make them contestable”. Thus, a different space for thought and action might be opened.

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