

Empowerment as Contested Terrain. Employability of the Dutch workforce.

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Abstract

Sociological analysis has mainly portrayed empowerment as a manipulative masking discourse. However, various actors in society view it as the opposite of domination and espouse it as a goal. Empowerment can constitute a discursive field shaped by its internal contractions between autonomy and control, between ambition and risk of programmed failure – exacerbated by the emphasis on responsibility, and between focus and stigmatization. The paper presents a case study of employability policy in the Netherlands. Employability can be seen as empowerment in matters of career. The study is based on 41 interviews with policy makers, managers, union and employers' leaders and politicians. It shows that actors drawing on the principle of empowerment as a goal in itself can reset or reclaim a drifting empowerment project in its inceptive phase and add their own twist during execution, evaluation and efforts to engineer improvements.

Introduction

Empowerment, the idea that people should be enabled to take control themselves, is an important paradigm of our time. It is the basis of various frames that are designed to organize experience by simplifying and condensing aspects of 'the world out there', to find resonance and to guide action (Benford, 2000). Employability policy, the empirical focus of this paper, can be seen as such an empowerment frame (Pruijt and Dérogée, 2010). The message is that employers can no longer offer job security and that employability enhancement, i.e. investment in skills, knowledge, insights and contacts, is the solution. Other examples of empowerment frames are the 'enabling' welfare state, student-directed learning and anti-Taylorist job redesign. It is the idea of empowerment which is essential here, regardless of whether the word 'empowerment' itself is used or not.

Analytical approaches to empowerment frames are hampered by conceptual problems. This is understandable, because sociology is preoccupied with constraints. As Smith and Fetner (2007:13) note, the task of sociology is to study how individuals' freedom is limited by forces that shape actions and beliefs. Concepts that concern the removal of constraints do not sit well with this preoccupation. Thus we often see empowerment frames analyzed as disguised control devices. Smith (2010: 294) notes that employability discourse prescribes how employees should construct and manipulate themselves, for example by constructing their work history as a series of projects instead of positions held, by downplaying any preference for stability and by engaging in 'identity work', a kind of emotional labor, to act out the dynamism of the free agent in the new economy. She argues that it conveys the belief that success and failure are only attributable to 'our capacity (or lack thereof) for personal growth and self-empowerment', an outlook that normalizes 'the terms and conditions of the flexible, unpredictable economy' and fails to 'challenge the structurally created inequalities'. Hallier (2009) suggests that employability policy obscures the possibilities for collective identification with a group and collective action. A further critique is that in employability discourse, only the supply side, i.e. the skills and other qualifications that people bring to the market, receive consideration (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005: 204-205). This critique implies that the employability discourse obscures how people may or may not get the opportunity to put these skills and qualifications into action; employees are blamed for stumbling on structural obstacles. When people fail, the discourse puts the blame on them, although a lack of employment opportunity might be the real cause of failure (Hallier and Butts 1999). Jacobsson (2004) notes that the concept of employability figures in a discourse that can be seen as inducing people to feel individually responsible for macro-economic problems.

Theoretically, however, there are reasons to doubt whether empowerment will necessarily turn out to be a disguised control device. After all, empowerment exists as a goal in itself. This goal can be defined as being the opposite of domination. It is espoused in social movements and by various other actors across society (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992; Stewart 2000).

The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility that an empowerment frame, by providing a set of simple oppositions, can constitute a discursive field that enables the creation of a range of meanings that are recognized as appropriate to be discussed (Spillman, 1995) and allows participants to engage in contests of meaning (Snow, 2007). Empirically, the target case for this exploration is the employability debate in the Netherlands. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the paper outlines the theoretical reasoning behind the idea that an empowerment frame can open up a discursive field structured by the internal contradictions of empowerment. This sets the stage for the analysis of the empirical case of employability policy in the Netherlands.

Theoretical exploration of the internal contradictions of empowerment

The starting point for our theoretical exploration is the observation that empowerment is fraught with contradictions. These contradictions become salient when considering that empowerment is an asymmetric relationship. Cruikshank (1999) theorizes empowerment as a power relationship in which knowledgeable actors induce others, deemed to be lacking in autonomy, to want to become active, self-policing, responsible citizens. Cruikshank hints at various contradictions by claiming that 'the will to empower contains the twin possibilities of domination and freedom' (1999: 2) and 'the will to empower is neither clearly liberatory nor clearly repressive' (1999: 72).

Cruikshank suggests that actors in the field of empowerment based anti-poverty policy consciously experienced such contradictions or tensions, which had an effect on the shape of anti-poverty programs. She notes that 'the danger was to encroach upon individual freedom by acting too much or too little. Hence, self-help schemes underwent constant revisions and reform' (1999: 54) and that 'the will to empower, or the desire to help the poor, had to be balanced against the imperative that the poor must help themselves. The subjectivity of the poor had to be balanced against their subjection' (1999: 74). We can distinguish at least three different internal contradictions that involve potentially self-negating aspects of empowerment.

As stated above, the empowerment relationship is asymmetric. This implies that there is a contradiction between autonomy and control. The asymmetrical relationship is essential to empowerment. Otherwise, we are simply dealing with freedom from interference and there would be no need to invoke the concept of empowerment. This asymmetrical relationship involves control in the form of regulation, management or influence. In other words, there is structural and/or normative control. This relational aspect clashes, to a variable degree, with autonomy. This is similar to what has been called the paradox of positive freedom (Carter 2003). Fromm (1942: 232) defines positive freedom as 'the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously.' A further characteristic of positive freedom is that it is seen as something that only exists when it is being exercised (Carter 2003). Positive freedom comes with expectations about what someone else's self-realization should entail; it is charged with morality (Berlin 1969: 124-131). In a debate on empowerment, this contradiction makes two positions possible. One can argue for little control to minimize the clash with autonomy, or criticize a given initiative for being more a form of discipline or coercion than empowerment. Conversely, one could argue that too little control contributes to passivity among those to be empowered. We will refer to this contradiction as the control contradiction.

A second contradiction involves risk and ambition. Empowerment frames challenge people to undertake some sort activity that pushes their limits and is thereby risky. If the desired results materialize, this imparts a sense of do-it-yourself accomplishment. Such an experience of success boosts learning, awareness of acquired capabilities and energy and thereby reinforces the transformation process (Morgan 1997: 198-199). But failure can cause an empowerment frame to backfire because it emphasizes responsibility. In the extreme case, an empowerment frame can entice people to start on an impossible mission that can end with them blaming themselves for problems beyond their control. Thus, the realism of empowerment schemes and the risk of programmed failure are a basis for debate. A potential issue is how much risk individuals face. For example, in the shape of exposure to market forces, how much risk should vulnerable people take and how much protection is required? And, in the case where the empowerment relationship entails the provision of resources, one may question whether these resources are adequate to limit the risk of failure. Finally, given initiatives might be criticized for not showing enough ambition, i.e. for staying too much on the safe side. We propose to term this contradiction the risk contradiction.

A third contradiction exists between focus and stigmatization. A key element in the empowerment relationship is that those to be empowered are deemed to be lacking in autonomy or self-sufficiency. This entails a risk of stigmatization, and labeling those to be empowered as deficient can hardly be empowering. An obvious strategy to deal with this is to define a wide target group for an empowerment initiative. However, defining a very wide target group might not be attractive when resources are scarce or when legitimization requires a target group that can be classified as needy. The absence of a clearly defined target group may also make it difficult to develop a coherent strategy. We will refer to this contradiction as the targeting contradiction.

The risk of stigmatization, a high level of control and programmed failure are not mutually exclusive. The theoretical possibility exists that an empowerment scheme is criticized because it declares a targeted group of people to be unfit, then forces them try something that is bound to fail, which ultimately leads to them blaming themselves for the failure.

Thus, there are theoretical reasons for considering the possibility that empowerment can open up a discursive field, precisely because of its internal contradictions. This can especially be expected when actors are present who subscribe to empowerment as a goal. Logically, such actors should be relatively sensitive to any drift in the direction of increased control and/or selective targeting with their associated problems of stigmatization and/or an increased risk of programmed failure.

Method

The case study is primarily based on a collection of verbatim transcripts of interviews made in 2009 as part of study into the management of social risks in the Netherlands, with the aim to cover all actors and organizations that were involved in policy making from 1995 to 2009 (Yerkes 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, only parts of interview transcripts pertaining to the issue of employability were used, containing statements from 41 interviewees. Twelve interviewees were associated with trade unions, including the general trade union confederation FNV, the Christian confederation CNV and the federation of unions for middle and higher employees MHP. Seven of these interviewees were (former) union officials and five were (former) union representatives. Six interviews were used from employers' associations, including two officials and four (former) representatives. Further interviewees included three independent political advisors on the Social and Economic Council, an advisory body for the government; three representatives of consultative organizations (bipartite industrial relations organizations); seven (former) governmental policy makers, plus seven parliamentarians, including two from the social democratic PvdA, one from the green party GL, one from the conservative party VVD, two from the Christian-democratic CDA and one from the Christian party CU. In addition, interview fragments from three interviews with collective bargaining officials working for companies in the health care and transportation sectors were used.

In the analysis no iterative coding procedure was used. The debate was reconstructed by following the temporal logic that was present in the case: after actors tried to make sense of the concept of employability and discussed its possibilities and risks, employability improvement efforts were institutionalized in collective bargaining agreements and employability programs. Actors evaluated these efforts, and used their evaluations as a basis for developing visions for future policies.

Policy documents were also studied, but the interviews had the advantage of covering what was *not* included in final decisions and documents, and therefore contained viewpoints that had not fully appeared in print. A drawback of the research strategy, however, is that inequalities in power are not fully taken into account, an illusion might be produced that all viewpoints have equal weight.

Several interviewees indicated that the information they gave was sensitive; for this reason respondents' identities are not revealed. We can see this as enhancing the reliability of the account, because anonymity made it unnecessary for the interviewees to conform to the official viewpoints associated with the interests they represented.

Confusion and claims

In the Netherlands, the adoption of the concept of employability required special interpretative effort because there was no straightforward Dutch translation for the term. Management consultants and employers defined it as *inzetbaarheid*, meaning physical and intellectual mobility, and a flexible attitude, thereby seeking to instrumentalize the concept (Pruijt and Dérogée, 2010).

Within the Dutch trade union movement there was, initially, little enthusiasm for employability. The lack of enthusiasm was directly related to employability being perceived as a management tool, which was consistent with the way in which management consultants and employers interpreted it. Some union officials saw employability as a management strategy with the goal to adapt organizations to changes in the environment. The union movement felt employability was the opposite of job protection, and found that unions in the UK, where a strong employability discourse also existed, had made a similar assessment. In British union circles, employability was seen as diminishing the workers' capability to resist, and was associated with labeling employees as unemployable.¹ A former union leader recalled:²

'For a long time, employability has suffered from the effect of a false start. [...] For a long time there has been the suspicion "you just mean layoffs". [...] Employability was a debate that should not be trusted. It started as an employers' issue, and because of this, it landed in a suspicious corner.'

Thus the unions detected a drift in meaning toward more control and less protection in the employers' and consultants' interpretation of the original idea of employability. As Hirschman (1970) reasoned, an actor faced with a decline has three options: loyalty, i.e. sitting it out, exit or voice. What followed was a process in which the union strategy changed from sitting it out to voice. Slowly, the idea emerged in union circles that the employability concept was too interesting to ignore. A trade union official reconstructed this as follows:

'We had a meeting with active members and discussed employability and what should we do with it. "Nothing", was the conclusion. But later we found out we had been talking to a group of people [...] who felt very secure, their jobs were not at risk. And later we had a discussion with another group, with a different composition and asked them: "suppose you lose your job [...], where does that leave you in terms of the labor market?" That prompted us to take it up as a policy issue.' (trade union official, CNV)

Some influential union officials argued that investing in employability was in the employees' best interest, and that the emergence of the employability concept was an opportunity to be seized upon by the unions. In essence, the unions chose the option of voice, which entailed embracing the concept of employability but defining it in their own terms. They wanted to express that employability is not a problem associated with employees contributing insufficiently to the organization, but rather, employability offers a means of creating security, given increasing disappearance of lifetime jobs.

The end result was that the Dutch trade union confederation FNV concluded the term employability could be translated as 'weerbaarheid', which means the ability to defend oneself. FNV felt that an employability policy that entailed the 'empowerment of members, to be in charge of their lifetime decisions,' one which could complement traditional collective protection, was possible (Sprenger and Van Klaveren 2004: 346). FNV established two leading principles for its employability policy. The first was that everything undertaken in the name of employability should be voluntary for employees. In terms of the control contradiction, this means that employability policy involves a certain amount of pressure on employees, at least normative pressure, to take control of their careers but not so much pressure that autonomy is lost. The second principle for FNV's employability policy was that investment in employability should be timely. Timely in this case means long before redundancies appear imminent, and this implies that employability investments should not be tied to any planned job cuts. In terms of the targeting contradiction, this policy implies staying on the safe side by avoiding the disempowering effect of labeling employees who are about to lose their jobs as lacking in employability.

This episode highlights a limitation of a deterministic, critical take on an empowerment frame as just a control tool: the possibilities in the discursive space seem limited to sitting it out or possibly exit. When the deterministic view is left behind, claims can be made on the basis of empowerment as a goal.

Employers' associations and unions, working together in the Labor Foundation (a bilateral institution that sets the collective bargaining agenda in the Netherlands), agreed to make enhancing employability a priority for the period 1997-2002. Employability became an institutionalized issue in collective bargaining, with training clauses becoming a standard feature in collective bargaining agreements. The proportion of collective agreements with specific clauses on employability investments, i.e. about non job-related training and the creation of personal development plans grew from 5.7% in 1995 to 31.4% in 2003 (Pruijt and Dérogée 2010). During negotiations, unions attempted to block all proposals linking employability investments to job cuts or dismissals. Vocational (re)training programs were set

up, with support from the unions. 'Sector funds' were created in industries predominantly consisting of small and medium-sized business. These funds were used for a variety of activities, of which training was the most notable. Their main source of income was a percentage of the wage costs contributed by employers in a given industry.

All these policies presumed the voluntary participation of employees, although HRM departments and the unions tried to exert influence on employees, i.e. a light version of control, also there was no direct link with the axing of jobs. This implies success for the strategy of voice adopted by the unions, which meant embracing the employability concept but giving it their own spin.

Perceived passivity attributed to lack of moral virtue or to structural constraints

Looking back on what had been tried and achieved, an array of respondents, including employers' organization representatives, union representatives, and experts, all pointed to employees' propensity to participate in training as a bottleneck. In other words, employees were found not to live up to the expectations that were embedded in employability policy. Thus, some disappointment was universal, but the ways in which respondents framed it differed.

Some respondents expressed reproach. A staff member at an employers' association said:

'Investing in people is something everybody is talking about: training. Nobody is against it but in practice it is difficult. How many people are really eager to participate in training?'

A top level civil servant pointed to substantial unused opportunities:

'It is clear that quite a lot is being spent on training for employees. Employers pay for a lot of training, and there are many sector-based training funds that have the problem of not being able to spend all their money rather than being overwhelmed by employees who are eager to participate in training.'

He based his assessment partly on his knowledge of a large telecom operator, where the top HR manager, himself adamant about investing in employability, had told him:

'Training is great, and we offer a lot of training and pay for all of it. We have only one problem: employees do not want to participate.'

As an explanation, he indicated that many employees have a 'reversed fear' about their employability and think that:

'The more employable I become, the greater the chance that I will be the first one to be laid off. And if I just stay put, my redundancy payment increases every year, making it more difficult to dismiss me. I'll stay comfortably put and the young ones will be out.'

A Christian-democratic Member of Parliament noted that the culture in the Netherlands is such that once someone has obtained a professional diploma, this signals the end of training. An exception to this are professions where continued training is mandatory, as is the case for health care professionals. He said very few people voluntarily sit down with books to study and update their professional knowledge. For respondents who expressed reproach, the employees' propensity to engage in training seems to be a moral issue. When they referred to the context, it was to a permissive context in which there were no penalties attached to training aversion. Logically, such an analysis leads to proposed improvements that focus on increased control and/or less protection.

There is also a very different discourse present in the interviews: one that avoids morality and focuses on causal explanations of employee behavior. This narrative does not signal a problem that could have been solved by increasing control over employees' behavior. A manager in the transport industry reflected on employability policy against the backdrop of initiatives undertaken in her company to enhance the employability of low-skilled staff with physically demanding tasks:

'It is a completely theoretical exercise. We have everything. [...] We have career scans, we have health scans, we have career guidance, we have evening classes, training, name it. But that is not the cause. People just don't do it. [...] How do we get people to the point that they start using it? How do you make people realize, when they start working, that they should not and can not continue in this work until they are sixty-five?'

She added that that in her company, money is never the problem. Managers are required to discuss training with each staff member on an annual basis and the company covers all training costs in both time and money. Nevertheless, few employees participate in training opportunities offered by the company. However, she did not simply blame the employees, but acknowledged doubts about the potential benefits of training for this group of employees:

'It is unskilled work. [...] And then, you are really lucky if a few people have some administrative skills, then they could become some sort of planner. But there are only a few of them.'

A union official also acknowledged the problem of employee reluctance to participate in training, but offered explanations based on factors external to the employee. One explanation pertained to employability programs that require employees to invest their own time and/or money: employees with a low income and many dependents simply have little time nor money available to invest in training. The union official also offered a second explanation pertaining to employees with previous negative experience with formal schooling:

‘And just for categories of employees for whom it would be very important, who are near the bottom of the labor market: they did not have much success in training before and for that reason, they are not very inclined to participate in training.’

The fear factor caused by negative school experiences was confirmed by a consultant working at an employers’ association. In addition, a Member of Parliament suggested that for some people, the concept of employability is too far removed from their daily life experience:

‘It depends upon your background. A few months ago I was at Corus [a steel plant in IJmuiden, part of Mittal Steel], where thousands of workers are going to be made redundant. For many of these people, this is their first job and their only job and they may already have worked there for twenty or thirty years. These people become totally frightened when they think they have to leave the company. Employability means nothing to them: “I don’t want employability, I simply want to continue working here.”’

In contrast, she suggested that employability is much more natural for someone in a position like her own, with a tertiary degree and a varied career:

‘I approve of things such as lifelong learning, further training and changing your job within the company once in a while, it keeps you fresh. I myself am an example of employability.’

Intensifying control or diminishing protection are not obvious solutions for dealing with problems such as fear. As an example, the union official quoted above felt that a solution for training anxiety was recognition or certification of previously acquired competencies or skills, because this made it possible to build employability without employees knowing it:

‘So not by giving them formal training, not even informal training; not by sending them to an in-company training course. No, through assignments and a change of workplace while presenting it to them as just one of these things that they have to do. In this way they can build competencies, and you can do this in a gradual manner. And if you assess previously acquired competencies every three years, you will find that competencies have been added.’

Thus analyses of the perceived passivity problem can be placed in a spectrum from blaming the individual to blaming structure. How actors assess the passivity problem, is relevant for whether they see employability enhancement policy as a matter of giving someone a hand or giving them a push. Or, in terms of the contradictions discussed above, whether a given scheme is likely to be seen as disempowering because it involves too much control or a is too risky an adventure.

Among the interviewees blaming the individual were representatives of employer's organizations, civil servants and right-wing politicians. Among those who blame structure were union representatives, one collective bargaining official working for a company, and left-wing politicians.

Grand designs: contested control

Apart from perceived employee passivity, a key theme emerging from the interviews was a perceived shortfall in investment directed at facilitating bold cross-labor market movement. Sector funds tended to restrict training to that which was relevant in their sector/industry rather than provide training that would allow employees to shift to another industry. This was because the sector funds collected their money from the employers within the sector. The concern was that these employers, the managers of sector funds and the union representatives involved were not enthusiastic about paying for training that would ultimately benefit employers in other sectors.

There was also some disappointment about the extent to which employability clauses in collective agreements, designed to increase employees' mobility, had the intended effect. In practice, the non job-specific training that was required for this was found to be significantly lagging behind job-related training. The impression was that union officials often did not make the considerable effort required to work out the details of collectively bargained agreements and to monitor implementation. Finally, there were doubts about whether line managers found the employability issue important enough to devote time to it, and whether their desire to retain good employees in their teams did not get in the way.

The main underlying theme was a collective action problem: everyone agreed that a well-trained, versatile workforce is in the common interest, but: individual employers expressed less enthusiasm for training workers who could run off to a competitor; sector fund managers were not exactly thrilled at the prospect of subsidizing cross-sector training; employers were not happy about paying into sector funds that could cause employees to leave the company; and

middle managers did not like to see their best people developing in such a way that they would move on.

The assessment that collective action dilemmas were hampering investment in bold cross-labor market mobility prompted discussion about a possible comprehensive, institutional system. *Comprehensive* because this would make investment in cross-labor market mobility less dependent on the decisions of individual employers or sector fund managers and *institutional* because this would formalize employability arrangements to a greater extent than the largely unmonitored clauses in collective agreements.

A comprehensive system could be legitimized by the system's contribution to an improved functioning of the labor market at large and to the skill and knowledge base of the economy. Apart from a solution to the collective action problem, a comprehensive system also offers a logical answer to the question of how to increase employee participation in training, because it would create institutional pressure. Thus, different reasons existed for thinking in a similar direction.

The quest for a comprehensive institutional system involved professionals whose job, more or less, was to raise ambition levels and generate ideas. One body that was active in this was the Project Directorate Lifelong Learning, a task force filled with civil servants from various government departments. One of its activities was to set up a think tank consisting of external experts. The Social and Economic Council, particularly the independent political advisors, i.e. members not connected to employers' associations or unions, worked on developing advisory reports. Advisory reports were also created by staff members of the Dutch Labor Foundation and the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy. The system designs suggested by these reports included elements such as training vouchers or individual learning accounts underpinned by learning rights, the right to sabbatical leave, and a fiscal stimulus.

Compared to the arrangements contained in collective agreements (1995-2009), the proposals for an improved, comprehensive and institutionalized employability enhancing policy entailed increased control over employees. For example, such control is present in the logic of a system in which money is set aside for each employee to provide for training. To the employee, this is visible in the form of an individual training account or a set of training vouchers. An unused amount of training money or an unused voucher symbolizes a missed opportunity. The idea was that this money should come from both employers and employees, thus an employee would view leaving a voucher unused as wasting his or her own money. This logic can be seen as constituting a light form of control.

Beyond this base line of control, opinions diverged. This is to be expected, given that a perceived lack of employee enthusiasm for further training was approached with a mix of moral judgment and causal explanation. Moral judgment lays the groundwork for a system with stricter control, while causal explanation provides the basis for creating a system with more caution in this respect. Among union representatives, who offered causal explanations, there was some willingness to increase the level of control in employability policy. One trade union official felt that maybe employees should be confronted directly and that pressure should be applied to coax them to training. Policy makers observed that some unions were prepared to discuss some form of obligatory participation in training, but found it difficult to speak about sanctions. Employers' representatives tended to be more adamant about employee obligations, but less so about new obligations for employers. Expert opinions were mixed. The Think Tank Lifelong Learning proposed a supplement to the legal basis of employment contracts in the form of an obligation for employers to offer employees 'the opportunity to participate in training that is necessary for maintaining and further developing professional skills, and that is oriented towards the development of the firm and the labor market,' and an obligation for the employee to participate in such training that is made available by the employer (Denktank Leren en Werken 2009: 43). However, experts were also sensitive to a possible counterproductive effect of increased control. Independent political advisors in the Social and Economic Council attempted to convince employers that study leave:

'offers the most advantages when you regulate it the least because employees will not only recover from work pressures but are most likely to learn things that will prove to be valuable to the employer.'

To summarize: in the thinking about an institutional system that would enable and push employees to shape their careers through bolder movements across the labor market, there was a drift towards greater control. This movement included representatives of employer organizations, experts and union representatives. Union representatives, in particular, strove to limit greater control to normative control.

Grand designs: contested risk

The risk contradiction, i.e. the contradiction between ambition and the risk of programmed failure, was also evident in the discourse about the envisioned system that would take employability policy to a higher level. From the point of view of empowerment as a goal in and of itself, failure is most disempowering when individual responsibility has been emphasized. Thus increased personal responsibility makes avoiding failure more urgent. Consultants working on employability proposals discovered that their idea of increasing employees' individual responsibility was found acceptable as long as they combined it with a plea for more resources:

‘If you maintained sufficient balance in the text, that employers played a role by providing means to facilitate employees in this, those sorts of debates. It was fun to see that that sort of thinking was ripe to be able to be written up.’ (social policy consultant)

Nevertheless, union representatives remained worried about programmed failure for certain categories of workers:

‘For a couple of years now, all political parties, from left to right, have emphasized individual responsibility. But the leftwing parties, and we as a trade union, are vigilant about situations in which people cannot bear this responsibility. We too feel that people have their own responsibility to do everything that they can to stay employed [...] but we note that not everyone can bear this personal responsibility.’ (union official)

A final controversy developed when employers started lobbying the government to abolish or diminish employees’ dismissal protection. In the Netherlands, employers can normally only dismiss workers after either obtaining permission from a state agency, the Center for Work and Income, whereby the necessity to dismiss must be proven, or by going to court. The latter procedure tends to involve monetary compensation in the form of redundancy payments. It should be noted that part-time workers have the same protection that full-time workers enjoy in this regard.

Employers made it clear to the unions that they would only be willing to engage in further discussions about employability if the rules regarding dismissal protection would also be discussed. At that point in time, as one respondent put it, the debates about employability and about dismissal protection became intertwined. Employers, experts and civil servants began advocating the idea of changing the dismissal rules in such a way that, in the event of a dismissal, a company that was able to show it had invested in an individuals’ employability would be required to pay less financial compensation. The same would apply if the employer had offered training, but the employee had refused to participate. In this way, dismissed employees found *not* to have invested in their employability would be punished by withholding of monetary compensation for their redundancy. This would create a stick directed at employees reluctant to participate in training.

The logic presented by proponents of a shift from protection to enhancement of employees’ employability was as follows: although employees would be less protected, training was a way to compensate for this because it would make them better equipped to move into new jobs. The assumption was that such training would provide a level of security that was at least equivalent to the level of security provided by existing dismissal protection. There are problems with this logic, however. One problem is that the people whose security would decrease as a

result of decreased protection, are not necessarily the same people who would gain security by investing in their employability. This point can be seen in the union reaction:

‘We say that when you do this, you take away a lot of protection from many people who can not bear this much personal responsibility.’ (union official)

A second problem is that this proposition is based on the assumption that investments in further training significantly enhance work security. Some experts found this to be a questionable assumption, but such doubts had not been strong enough for them to give up the idea. Even stronger doubts were voiced by trade union confederation FNV leader Wilna Wind, who noted that the idea of replacing dismissal protection with employability investments was attractive in theory, but does not line up with practical reality. She added that the discussions on employability had been going on for ten years, but that not much had materialized in reality (Kammer 2007).

The plan to link investment in employability with a decrease of protection eventually failed after a major setback in 2007 when the social-democratic cabinet ministers opposed it, apparently for electoral reasons, and threatened to cause the government to fall. We can see this as a case that shows that fear that an empowerment scheme will send vulnerable people on a path towards a programmed failure can have a limiting effect on the ambition level.

Concluding notes and discussion

Employability policy in the Netherlands can be analyzed as a balancing game that is structured by general contradictions inherent in empowerment. One of these contradictions is the control contradiction, which is the contradiction between autonomy and control. Employability is about employees taking control of their careers, but as Garsten and Jacobsson (2004a: 14) note, employability policy also seems to fit into a trend of controlling people more effectively through an ‘internalization of control’. It is an example of Foucault’s ‘conduct of conduct’, one of the ‘technologies of the self’, i.e. ‘techniques that empower and activate forms of agency’ (Garsten and Jacobsson (2004b: 276-278). For those on the employers’ side in this debate, the control contradiction did not appear to be salient. This was different for the unions. Initially, union representatives chose to ignore the concept of employability. This exit option corresponds to what the critical literature on employability describes as people shutting themselves off from self-governance, and tends to present as the only alternative to uncritical acceptance (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004b: 281).

That voice is also an option only became apparent once when the unions stopped seeing employability as a managerial control device, and defined it as an employee’s ability to defend her/himself. This shift was analogous to the debate on flexibility in Sweden. In this debate,

union leaders chose to define flexibility as freedom for employees rather than as freedom for employers (Engstrand 2007). Subsequent union involvement in the Netherlands entailed participation in the development of employability programs that, while putting normative pressure on employees, stopped short of imposing mandatory arrangements. The argument hinged on the assessment why employees had been more passive than the designers of employability programs had hoped. Structural explanations for this provided a basis for advocating light control; protagonists who explained perceived passivity as an individual, moral shortcoming, tended to favor heavier forms of control.

The second general contradiction of empowerment, the contradiction between ambition and the risk of programmed failure, played a role in the debate about a possible new comprehensive system that would simultaneously: 1) sidestep the collective action problems hampering investment in cross-industry employability; 2) put more pressure on employees to participate in training; 3) legitimize a decrease in dismissal protection; and 4) for optimistic policy experts, remedy the security loss incurred by a decrease of dismissal protection. This line of thinking proved vulnerable to doubts as to whether such a system would not place unrealistic demands on parts of the working population.

The final general contradiction of empowerment, the targeting contradiction, i.e. the contradiction between focus and stigmatization, is expressed in the critical literature on employability in the form of a concern that the concept can function as an instrument for classification (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004a). Bollérot (2001) explains that this mechanism can cause an employability program to have an effect opposite of the one that was intended. In the case of the employability debate in the Netherlands, this concern led to a preference for employability programs positioned as beneficial for broad categories of employees, not specifically as beneficial for employees who are slated for dismissal.

Obviously, employability is only one of many empowerment frames. However, it may be seen as a critical case showing that such a frame need not necessarily be a tool that obscures control; it can open up a debate. This seems dependent on the condition that those to be empowered are represented by a powerful actor, or at least an actor enjoying strong support from the institutional framework. In Netherlands, the latter is the case. Although only 20 per cent of employees were union members in 2011, a decrease from 28 per cent in 1997, the unions play an important role in the coordinated market economy. 80 per cent of all employees are covered by a collectively bargained agreement. In the central institutions of the labor market and socio-economic policy, employers and unions discuss both long-term policy and the agendas for upcoming rounds of collective bargaining. In this manner, an exclusive managerial perspective is avoided. This seems in contrast to the UK, a country in which the employability

discourse was also strong. Analyses of the latter suggest that it was unitary, and dominated by a managerial perspective (Hallier and Butts, 1999; Morley, 2001; Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). This underpins the relevance of the institutional framework as an underlying condition for the development of a debate structured by the contradictions of empowerment.

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